

H2O: A Spin on Things

by k8sastar

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Summary: Inspired by Krystalstlazz's H2O: A Fishy Tail, this FanFiction continues with the lives of the H2O characters.

1. Episode One, New Beginnings: Part I

****_EXTREMELY IMPORTANT AUTHOR'S NOTE:_****

****This story is not so much a spin-off from the TV series H2O: Just Add Water, as it is a spin-off from Krystalstlazz's H2O: A Fishy Tail. Krystalstlazz is my real-life best friend, and I've been very engaged in her writing process on Fan Fiction. I'm not actually the biggest fan of H2O, but I got so involved in the storylines Krystalstlazz was writing that I couldn't help but put my own spin on things. If you HAVE read (or are reading) Krystalstlazz's story, please keep in mind that my own story takes place AFTER the first part, but completely removed from her second part. I realise a lot of the characters will be different, but please bear with it. If you HAVEN'T read Krystalstlazz's story, I would suggest doing so before you read this (but only read part one!), as it will fill in the gap between the end of the TV series and the beginning of my story, most importantly making a few of these plot lines make sense. The other important thing to remember is that I wrote this a little while ago, and then gave Krystalstlazz permission to use one or two of the storylines thinking I'd never publish it... and then I did. So if any details seems a tad too familiar, many apologies. I know that's a lot of information, but hopefully it all makes sense! I promise that once you wrap your head around it, it'll be quite simple. Enjoy reading, and many MANY thanks to Krystalstlazz: You're an incredible writer, an inspiration and a wonderful friend.****

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N.B. H2O: A Fishy Tail Part One finished with the building of their water village, which took place around the end of 2016.

****_Character Profile as of 1st January 2019_****

New Characters are indicated in Italics

****The McCartneys****

Lewis (February 5th) and Cleo (July 12th)

Jennifer Raine b. 19th February 2015

Max Isaiah b. 29th September 2017

****The Bennetts****

Zane (30th November) and Rikki (1st October)

Leila Mary and Charlie Allison b. 4th June 2015

****The Doves****

Ash (2nd January) and Emma (15th March)

Eric Hayden b. 17th May 2016

Lucy Sienna b. 28th January 2018

****The Charles****

Anna (7th March) and Ben (14th August)

Matthew James b. 3rd July 2017

Thomas Robert b. 20th September 2018

****The Benjamins****

Will (9th May) and Bella (6th December)

Jacob Forest (Jake) b. 31st March 2015

Danielle Laura (Dannie) b. 8th February 2018

Cleo, Bella, Emma, Rikki and Anna are now all 29 years old

Jennifer and Jake are now almost four

Leila and Charlie are now three and a half

Eric is now two years and eight months

Matthew is 18 months old

Max is 15 months old

Lucy is almost a year old

Danielle is 10 months old

Thomas is 4 months old

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Chapter One

****New Year's Eve 2018- Mako Island****

"Hurry up Rikki, we're going to be late!" Zane yelled as he picked up Leila's stuffed dolphin toy, "It's already quarter to!"

"I'll meet you down there, okay?" Rikki replied from the bedroom. She inhaled deeply and took one last look at the object in her hand. She grimaced briefly, before hurriedly tying her hair back into a messy ponytail. "It'll be okay, it'll be okay," she whispered to her reflection.

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Down at the water, Cleo was pacing frustratedly. "Come on you guys!" she yelled out to the boat, "It's midnight. Your watches are wrong."

"It's eleven fifty-one and you're not fooling me. Just be patient," Lewis laughed back.

Cleo rolled her eyes and went to sit down beside Emma. "Why must we always wait for midnight? It's not as if anyone can really tell the difference between 2018 and 2019," she grumbled.

Emma smiled at Cleo's impatience and leaned back against the sand, her huge pregnant belly shining in the moonlight. "I swear, Cleo, New Year's Eve always makes you go crazy."

"I know, I know," Cleo sighed, "I just really like fireworks."

Anna wandered over to the bonfire, holding baby Thomas close to her. She looked out over the horizon, remembering their first New Year's Eve here on Mako.

Two years ago she had stood on this same shore, Lewis and Will out in the same little wooden boat with a load of explosives. She laughed as she thought of the way they were back then: She and Ben had been newlyweds, hopelessly happy and in love; Jennifer and Jake, both nearly two, spoke in earnest but garbled sentences; Leila and Charlie toddled goofily around; Eric was only a baby. The gang had increased a lot in numbers since then.

Now Jennifer, Jake, Leila and Charlie were playing tag on the sand, with Ben as a mediator, running around and giggling. Eric tried sincerely to keep up, but his little legs were no match for the bigger kids' energy.

Matthew yawned sleepily and toddled over to hug Anna's leg. Max was curled up on the picnic blanket next to Cleo with his head in her lap, and every so often murmured, "I's awakeâ€|" before drifting back to sleep.

Lucy was snuggled against Ash's shoulder, fast asleep, as he slowly walked around the bonfire, humming quietly to his daughter. Bella sat serenely wrapped in a blanket close to the fire with Danielle in her lap.

The nearly full moon smiled down happily at the five young families, and shone brightly over the calm sea.

Zane rounded the hairpin turn of the path down to the beach and looked anxiously back in the direction of the village.

"Hey Zane," Bella smiled, "Where's Rikki?"

"She'll be along, I think" he replied uncertainly. Zane went over and sat by the water's edge. He and Ben exchanged a sup-nod.

Will called out to shore from the boat. "It's eleven fifty-eight guys- we all here?"

Zane began, "Actually, Rikki's..."

"Right here!" she said, rounding the corner quickly and running down to the water's edge. She smiled and slipped neatly under Zane's arm.

"You okay?" he asked quietly. "Sure!" Rikki said unconvincingly, "Let's just watch the fireworks."

"Alright," Lewis began officially, "By my watch, which I have synchronized perfectly to within an eighth of a second of official atomic time using the..."

"Get on with it!" The unanimous cry from the shore cut off Lewis' tedious monologue.

"Twenty Nineteen will be here in fifteen seconds," Lewis finished hurriedly.

"Twenny Nine-tee! Twenny Nine-tee!" Eric squealed excitedly, spinning in circles before running over to collapse in Emma's arms.

"Ten!" Cleo called, impatient to get the countdown underway.

"Nine," Leila and Charlie screeched.

"Eight," Emma and Ash chimed.

"Seven," Bella sang.

"Six," Jacob and Jennifer giggled.

"Five," Anna and Ben cheered.

"Four," Will shouted.

"Three," Lewis yelled.

"Two," Rikki and Zane whispered.

"One!" they all screamed, "HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

Beautiful displays of bright colour erupted simultaneously over the ocean, reflected perfectly in its clear, calm waters. Sparkles of red and yellow and purple dashed in front of the moon, exploding victoriously before disappearing into the night sky.

Jacob, Jennifer, Leila and Charlie danced about excitedly. Emma and Ash kissed gently, and hugged their two young children. Bella kissed Danielle's forehead and laughed at her son's frolicking. Ben wrapped his wife, son and baby up in a giant bear hug. Cleo stroked Max's sleeping face sweetly. Out in the boat, Lewis and Will shouted jubilantly as showers of sparks erupted over them.

Rikki turned to Zane and kissed him. "Happy New Year," she said sweetly, "Oh, and by the way, I'm pregnant." She frowned anxiously. Zane smoothed her wrinkled forehead and smiled. "Congratulations."

2. Episode One, New Beginnings: Part II

"Ugh!" Emma exclaimed dramatically, "Why is it so unbelievably hot!?"

Eight months pregnant in the middle of summer, Emma was more than a little uncomfortable. It was January 1st 2019, exactly one month before her due date, and 34 degrees Celsius. Emma was resting by the moon pool, cooling her stomach with her power. Bella sat next to her, reading a magazine, keeping a watchful eye on Jacob, Matthew and Eric, who were using their tails to circle around the moon pool. Lucy and Danielle were playing in the shallow end, splashing each other with their tails, and Anna was nursing baby Thomas in the far corner.

"Just a little while left, Em!" said Anna encouragingly, "And then you'll have a beautiful little baby. Trust me, it'll be worth it when it arrives."

"I know, I know," Emma sighed, "I just wish it wasn't so darn hot!"

"Was Lewis able to find out what gender the baby's going to be?" Bella asked.

"No," Emma said sadly, "The baby is all curled up and he can't seeâ€¦ you know. I wish I knew what little Freckle was though. I really want to decide on a name." Emma rubbed her stomach gently.

"What!?" Anna exclaimed, "You mean you're ****not**** going to stay with Freckle? I thought it was so cute, regardless of the gender."

Bella and Emma laughed at Anna's earnest expression. The noon sun was now directly over the moon pool, and the alcove became even hotter than before. Emma moaned.

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Rikki woke up with a start, awakening from a bad dream. She breathed a sigh of relief and rolled over to look at the alarm clock.

It was after twelve! Rikki panicked and jumped up quickly. She ran into Charlie and Leila's room, which was decorated with underwater scenes and dolphins. Already freaking out that she had forgotten to wake up and had left her children alone for the whole morning, Rikki then discovered two empty beds, and ran outside in a state of utter

panic. Zane was sitting at the picnic table in the middle of the courtyard between the cottages. He was calmly reading a newspaper and drinking coffee in the noon sun. He and Rikki had closed the café for the holiday season, so he was staying on Mako till the following week.

"Zane! Where the heck are the girls?" Rikki screamed at him.

He laughed and said "Calm down, honey! Don't you remember that Cleo was going to baby-sit for us today? Leila and Charlie are hanging out with Jennifer and Max."

"Oh," Rikki said sheepishly, "I knew that."

Zane grinned at his clueless young wife.

"Oh stop it, " she balked. "Anyway, why didn't you wake me this morning?"

"You looked peaceful," he explained, "I didn't want to disturb you. Besides, with the new baby on the way, I figured you could use a little extra rest."

"What?" Rikki exclaimed. Then, remembering her New Year's news, she sighed fretfully. "Oh yeah."

"What's up?" Zane asked, concerned by Rikki's sad face.

"It's justâ€¦ I don't want any more," she moaned, "I don't do kids, I'm no good with them!"

"You seem to be doing all right," Zane said sweetly.

"Don't get me wrong, I love our girls- but another one? I don't think I'll cope."

"Hey, heyâ€¦" Zane soothed, wrapping Rikki in his arms, "It'll be alright. You're a wonderful mother. Much better than you think you are."

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"Hey Lewisâ€¦" Cleo called out. She was sitting in a hammock in the forest behind their house, watching Jennifer and Max play with Rikki's twins.

"Yup, yup, coming!" Lewis yelled from inside his office, and came skidding out clumsily wearing a lab coat and flip-flops.

"Hey sweetie, how's the research going?" Cleo asked.

Ever since they had moved to Mako, Lewis had been undertaking experimental (and of course highly confidential) research about the mermaids (and mermen), and he spent most days in his laboratory, examining microscopic tail cells and investigating the DNA similarities between humans and fish.

"Oh y'know," he sighed, "Slowly. But I did make an absolutely fascinating discovery this morning!"

"What's that?" Cleo questioned excitedly.

"The structure and function of a certain antibody found in many species of fish is the same as one that plays a predominant role in the intestinal systems of humans," he said elatedly.

"Oh my gosh!" Cleo squealed sarcastically, "I have no idea what that means!"

"It helps to explain the evolution of the human intestinal immune responses," Lewis explained.

"Andâ€¦" Cleo said skeptically.

"It may or may not have a minute degree of relevance to my study of how you and the other girls transformâ€¦" Lewis finished cautiously.

"Wow," Cleo said mockingly, "That's just great." She smiled cheekily and kissed his cheek. "At least you're excited, sweetie."

"Anyway," Lewis changed topic quickly, "What did you call me out here for?"

Cleo, remembering her idea, stood up energetically. "So I was just thinking!" she said excitedly.

"That's a first!" Lewis laughed cheekily.

Cleo stuck her tongue out. "I was thinking that I'm bored of not working."

When they had first moved to Mako Island, Cleo had continued to swim over to the Marine Park daily for work, but she always felt like she never had enough time with Jennifer, and after Max was born, she decided to quit her job to be a full-time mum.

"And I came up with an amazing idea! What if we opened a nature and marine wildlife centre on the public half of Mako? We could have dolphin encounters, and nature hikes, and other stuff like that! And that would mean that we could have jobs to do, and I'd still have enough time to look after Jennifer and Max!" Cleo finished excitedly.

"It's a great idea honey, but need I point out the obvious?" Lewis asked.

"What's that?"

"You and all the other girls are mermaidsâ€¦" he said slowly, "So, forgive me if I'm wrong, but dolphin tours require swimmers-preferably ones who don't have tails of their own."

"No, no, I thought about that already!" Cleo said impatiently, "Those of us who can't swim around the public- Me, Emma, Rikki, Anna, Bella and Ben-would be in charge of the land-based side of things. And then Will and Zane and Ash could do the boat tours and stuff like that. And you could keep doing your research."

"It does sound niceâ€¦" Lewis said pensively.

"So I can ask everyone at dinner tonight?" Cleo exclaimed.

"Sure, why not."

3. Episode One New Beginnings: Part III

Emma, Anna and Bella walked back from the moon pool, each with two children in tow. When they got close to the mermaid village, they let Jacob, Eric and Matthew run ahead. Emma kept a tight grip on both of Lucy's hands, because although, at nearly a year old, she was almost walking by herself, she still fell over constantly, and needed Emma's help to remain upright. Bella piggybacked Danielle and Anna had Thomas in a sling.

_When they got to the village, they sat down on the benches in the courtyard park. Ash, Will and Ben had all had to go back to work today, so the three girls were alone till later that afternoon. _

" I wonder what Rikki and Cleo are up to? Do you think we can convince Zane to look after all the kids so we can go for a swim?" Bella asked hopefully.

"Zane? I really, really don't think he could handle them all." Emma cringed at the thought of Zane juggling ten children.

"He can barely manage two! " Anna laughed, "It's a good thing they've only got Leila and Charlie. There's no way they could cope with more!"

_Just then Rikki came up the path from the beach and overheard the tail end of their conversation. _

"Um, Anna," Emma said softly. Anna turned around just in time to see Rikki burst into tears and run into her cottage.

"Oh my gosh, I feel terrible!" said Anna worriedly, "I'd better go see if she's okay."

As Anna left, Bella turned to Emma with a slight frown. "Poor Rikki. I wonder why she got so worked up over it though? It's not as if she and Zane want more kids."

Emma thought about this for a minute and then gasped. "I wonder if she's pregnant?" she exclaimed.

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"Rikki?" Anna knocked quietly on the door of Rikki's bedroom. "Rikki, it's Anna, please let me in. I'm so sorry, I never meant that. You know I think you're a great mother, and I never meant to say otherwise."

_ Rikki opened the door cautiously and wiped her eyes. Her mascara was running in streaks down her tear-stained cheeks, and she was hiccupping slightly. _

_"It's alright, Anna, I know you didn't mean it." Rikki hugged Anna and hiccupped. "I'm sorry for overreacting. It's just thatâ€¦" Rikki

hesitated._

"You can tell me if you want to," Anna said softly.

"I'm going to have another baby," Rikki whimpered, "And I don't know how I'm going to cope! I mean I'm doing fine with the girls at the moment. I have a system, and it's working, and they're learning to self-manage a bit, and I'm getting to work part-time, and I don't have to change diapers any more, and I just don't know how I'm going to cope with another little person to look after!"

_Rikki broke down sobbing in Anna's arms. _

"Shhhh..." Anna whispered, "It'll be okay."

After a minute, Rikki breathed in deeply and stood up straighter. "There's no point in me breaking down," she said firmly, "I have all of you guys as a support network, and Zane to help me. And heck, Emma's about to have her third, and you don't see ****her**** freaking out. It'll be okay. I just need to adjust to it, that's all."

"Do you want to tell everybody tonight, or do you wanna wait?" asked Anna.

"No, tonight I think," Rikki said, nodding.

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_The long wooden dining table was set beautifully that evening. Emma was "nesting", as she put it, and currently had quite a penchant for organizing and making things beautiful. No one was complaining, because the village was tidier and lovelier than ever under her housewifely care. Bella and Cleo had made dinner tonight, a huge fish that had been caught by Zane the day before. _

Ash and Ben sat at the head and foot of the table, and Zane, Will, Lewis and all the girls filled in the middle. The kids had had dinner earlier, and were now asleep or playing in the communal room next to the dining hall.

After the meal was finished and cleared away, the weekly meeting began. Normally these were informal, and everyone just talked about their days and their plans. Sometimes a housekeeping issue would be brought up, or if any announcements needed to be made, these meetings were the usual time.

"I call this meeting to order, as the 106th convention our fine establishment," Ash began, as the acting chairman for that evening (they all took turns), "Anna, you're acting as secretary tonight? And Lewis, as per usual, is our treasurer. I open the floor to any issues of urgency or excitement."

Rikki gulped and looked at Anna, who smiled encouragingly. "Well," she said, "Zane and I found out yesterday that we're going to be having another baby."

_Congratulations were heard all round, and the girls all came over to hug Rikki. _

"I knew it," mouthed Emma to Bella.

The meeting resumed, and Cleo brought up her plan.

"So guys, I was thinking, and Lewis and I talked about it todayâ€¦ I think it would be really cool if, on the public half of Mako, we opened up a wildlife and marine experience thingy. We could all help out as much we could, and I think it would a great thing to start. What do you guys think?"

"That would be amazing!" "So cool, Cleo!" "That would be just wonderful!" "And then we could all work here on the island!" "It's perfect!"

It was decided that they would all come up with ideas for the marine reserve and present them to the group.

"Anything else urgent or important?" Ash asked the group, "No, well on to insignificant or trivial matters then."

Emma smiled prettily and said, "It's exactly a month till my due date!"

Bella piped up, "I think that Dannie might start walking within the next few weeks. She's been cruising all round the house."

Lewis related the news about the fish research. Cleo groaned and the group laughed at Lewis' enthusiasm.

4. Episode One, New Beginnings: Part IV

Three weeks later- the morning of January 22nd 2019

"Alright Rikki, we're about good to go," Lewis said in a business-like tone.

_They were in Lewis' laboratory, which was currently, for the purpose of both Rikki and Emma, acting as a doctor's office. Rikki was lying on the bed, counting the bubbles in the crystallized water ceiling. Lewis squirted the ultrasound gel on her belly, and waited as Rikki's tail appeared. _

"For as long as I've known all of you," Lewis said, shaking his head, "I have never gotten used to a tail coming out of nowhere."

_As Lewis ran the scanner over Rikki's stomach, she looked at the monitor anxiously. _

"Well, by the look of it, you're about three months along," said Lewis.

Rikki nodded. "That's about right."

"And, hang on a minute, I might be wrongâ€¦" Lewis frowned.

"What, what is it?" Rikki asked anxiously.

_"This may seem quite unbelievable, but I'm getting two distinctive

heartbeats."_

"Two? Mine and the baby's right?" Rikki said nervously.

"Rikki, it appears you're having twins again," Lewis said, dumbfounded. He pointed to the image on the monitor, and sure enough, Rikki could faintly make out two heads.

"You're kidding meâ€|" Rikki groaned.

As Emma swapped places with Rikki, she squeezed her hand encouragingly. "We're all going to be here for you Rikki," she said softly.

"But twins!" Rikki moaned, "AGAIN!"

"You must be some sort of fertility goddess," Emma laughed.

Rikki went and sat in the chair where Emma had been sitting a moment ago, and watched as Emma transformed.

"So Emma, wow, just ten days to go," Lewis said encouragingly, "You must be getting pretty uncomfortable."

"Just a tad," Emma smiled.

"Well, everything's looking all great, she looks wonderfully healthy and just about ready to be born," Lewis said chirpily.

"She!" Emma sat up quickly, "You mean you can see what gender she is?"

"Yup, sure can," replied Lewis, smiling, "You're going to be having a beautiful baby girl."

Emma pressed her lips together to keep from crying of joy. "My Freckle's a girl? My Freckle's a girl!" she exclaimed to Rikki.

Rikki laughed at the nickname, thinking that any passer-by would consider Emma quite crazy for claiming a gender for a brown spot on her arm.

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_"Wow, Dannie, you're really doing it!" Bella squealed excitedly as her daughter took a few shaky steps across the lawn. At eleven months, Danielle was an early walker, but then again, the mermaids' children had always had accelerated skills. _

"Come on Will," Bella muttered, "Work is no way as important as thisâ€|" With her old-fashioned Polaroid camera, Bella quickly snapped a few pictures of Danielle toddling precariously around the garden.

Danielle tripped and fell onto her little hands. She frowned determinedly, pushed herself up into a standing position again and took another wobbly step. She slowly and cautiously walked over to her mother, and collapsed into her arms smiling.

"Oh my baby girl!" Bella said, "I'm so proud of you! Just wait till Daddy gets home and then you can show him too! Aren't you just the most amazing thing in the world?"

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_Anna sat in the cozy armchair of her and Ben's living room, reading _Curious George _to Matthew as he sat quietly on her lap. Thomas was asleep in his basinet on the other side of the room. Ben was at work on the mainland, and was currently building an expansive house for a wealthy entrepreneur._

"George promised to be good," Anna read solemnly, "But it is easy for little monkeys to forget."

She looked down and realized she was reading to herself, because Matthew was fast asleep and sprawled out on her lap.

_She picked him up gently, careful not to wake him, and tucked him into his bed in the nursery. _

"Night night little monkey," she whispered, and drew the curtains to block out the early afternoon sun. She stroked his strawberry blond locks and left quietly.

_Anna exhaled as she walked back out into the living room. As dearly as she loved both her sons, she never loved them more than when they were both fast asleep. _

Exhausted as she was, Anna suddenly got a rush of energy, and ran to her desk excitedly. She pulled out a stack of blank blueprints and began to draw furiously.

Ever since Matthew's birth back in 2017, Anna had only designed for a few clients, and after Thomas was born, she had practically done no houses at all.

_ Now, with all the excitement of the marine and wildlife sanctuary on Mako, she had the sudden inspiration to create the headquarters of it. Anna drew for hours, tweaking elevations and adding windows here and there. She was completely immersed in a trance-like state until she heard Thomas' cry from the next room. Tucking the blueprints into a drawer, she went to go pick up her crying baby._

__"Shhhhhâ€¦." She crooned softly, "I know it's a big scary world, but you're safe here with us on Mako. Nobody's ever gonna hurt you."_

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5. Episode One, New Beginnings: Part V

_Cleo ran along the beach barefoot, breathing rhythmically and listening to her iPod. Whenever she got a chance to escape the clutches of her offspring, she came here to let off steam. _

_As she came up the path toward the mermaid village, she heard a small, piercing scream. She ran over in the direction of Bella's house and stopped short. _

In the forest behind the Benjamins' house, Cleo could hear a loud wailing. She ran into the bush and jumped down a little cliff to find Danielle lying on the ground sobbing, clutching her arm gingerly.

"Oh my gosh," Cleo exclaimed in a shocked tone, "Dannie, honey, are you alright?"

_Danielle whimpered, and Cleo picked her up tenderly. She ran back up the path with Danielle in her arms and went straight to Lewis' office. _

"Lewis!" Cleo panted breathlessly.

"What is it?" he asked in a concerned tone.

_"Danielleâ€| hurtâ€| must haveâ€| fallenâ€| fix her!" Cleo gasped. _

"Alright, I'll take care of her," Lewis said quickly, "You go find Bella!"

Cleo ran back to Bella's house and knocked furiously on the front door. "Bella!" she screamed.

Bella opened the front door with a concerned look on her face. "What's the matter Cleo?"

"Dannie's hurt!" Cleo exclaimed, "She must have fallen down that little cliff behind your house. She's with Lewis now."

"WHAT!" Bella yelled anxiously.

"I was with her just a second ago. I ran inside to check on Jacob and to get dinner started, and I just left her in the yard by herself!" Bella explained hurriedly as they rushed back to Lewis' office, " I didn't think she'd get anywhere, she only started walking this morning! I'm such a terrible mother!"

_As they came through the door of the office, Bella gasped at the sight of Danielle. Her face was tear-stained and muddy, she had cuts all over her legs, and her arm was limp at her side. _

"Oh my baby!" Bella cried, and hurried to Danielle's side.

Lewis was looking at the x-ray he'd just taken of Danielle's arm. "Her wrist is broken," he said grimly, "Not badly, just a hairline fracture, but enough to need a cast for three weeks or so."

"I feel so awful!" Bella said, "My poor girl. I can't believe I left her alone!"

"Do you want me to call Will?" Cleo asked quietly.

"Yeah, call him. He should know about this as soon as possible."

_Little Danielle was very brave as Lewis put the cast on her arm, and only cried a bit as he ran a few more tests to check for concussion, spinal damage or internal bleeding. She smiled heroically, showing

off her seven little teeth. After Danielle was declared perfectly fine (except for the wrist!) by Lewis, Bella took her home, fed her and put her to bed. _

By the time Will arrived home, Danielle, Jacob and Bella were all fast asleep, even though it was only six o'clock. He kissed Danielle's forehead, smiling at the stickers that Lewis had put on her cast. He went and lay down beside Bella, who turned over sleepily and realized he was there.

_He put his finger to his lips and they went out into the living room. _

"Oh Will, it was awful!" Bella began, "I'm such an awful mother!"

He hushed her and pulled her close. "It's okay," he said soothingly, "It's in the past, and she's alright."

After a minute, Bella straightened. "She walked today," Bella said softly.

"That's incredible!" Will exclaimed, "Well, she's had quite an eventful day today."

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_At dinner that evening, nobody talked much. Bella burst into tears once, and spent the rest of the meal shoving her peas around with her fork. Emma held her stomach happily, thinking about the baby girl growing inside of her. Rikki was paranoid all evening, and was freaked out when she was served _**two**_ pieces of chicken, _**two**_ scoops of peas, and _**two**_ slices of kumara. Anna stared at the ceiling, pondering the architecture of their village. Even Lewis, exhausted from his day of being maternity doctor and pediatrician, didn't have the energy to bore them with science. _

"All right," Cleo said finally, "I'm sick of the silence."

Nobody spoke.

"Really, we're going to do this?" Cleo asked huffily.

Still no one responded.

Cleo dropped her cutlery onto the ice floor with a loud clatter. Everyone jumped and all looked at Cleo with bewildered expressions.

"What the heck!" several people exclaimed at once.

"Oh, you're awake, good!" Cleo rolled her eyes at their oblivion.

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_The marine reserve was on everyone's minds in the little mermaid village. Cleo's amazing idea was beginning to take shape, and plans and dreams were intertwining successfully. Cleo was the driving force behind the whole thing. Imaginative and excited, she came up with

wild ideas that were soon transformed into realistic solutions by the organized Emma and logical Anna. _

Anna had finished the plans for the sanctuary headquarters, and Ben had begun pre-building procedures. They had cleared the project with the council, and had obtained all the necessary permissions to form a wildlife sanctuary. This building, unfortunately, would have to be made of normal materials rather than crystallized water like their own village.

Though building had not yet begun, already everyone had claimed a specific role.

Emma and Ash, who had ample experience with horses, would be in charge of the stables, and lead horse-treks across the crater of Mako.

Bella, Will, Zane and Rikki would take the boat and lead dolphin and marine life expeditions in the surrounding waters of the island.

Ben, Anna and Cleo would lead the nature hikes and aviary encounters.

Yes, plans were coming ahead beautifully, and the little village looked forward with keen anticipation to this time next year, when their very own marine life sanctuary would be up and running.

6. Episode One, New Beginnings: Part VI

1st February 2019

Emma woke with a smile and looked at her belly. Today was the day.

She walked over to the shared living room and sat down in a big armchair, gloating just a little. Rikki, Cleo, Bella and Anna all watched her enter rather majestically.

Bella, sitting on the sofa across from her laughed a bit. "Careful, Em, you're running the risk of turning into Cleopatra."

Emma rolled her eyes and poked her tongue out at Bella. "Haha, very funny, but in case you guys haven't checked your calendars- it's my due date!"

"Yay, Em, you made it!" "That's so great!" "I can't wait to meet little Freckle."

"I just really wanted to thank you guys for being here for me throughout this whole pregnancy," Emma said sweetly, crying just a little bit, "You guys are the best friends ever, and I know that I could never have stayed this relaxed without you all. I love you all so much, and I know that, come tomorrow, little Freckle is going to love you guys just as much as I do."

oOoOoOoOoOo

15th February 2019

_Emma woke with a frown and looked down at her belly.
Again._

"That's right!" she exclaimed agitatedly, as she walked into the living room and sat down in the big armchair, "Still no baby."

"Gosh, Em," said Rikki, whose own bump was starting to show a bit, "You're, like, two weeks overdue! Is that normal?"

Emma looked up at Rikki with a menacing glare on her face. "No, **Rikki**, it's not **normal**_,," she said in an agonized tone, "She just won't leave! Get out," she said to her stomach, "Get out, get out, get out!"_

Anna walked over and grasped Emma's hand comfortingly. "Hey," she said gently, "It's okay. Just forget about the fact that it's after your due date. I mean, I know you like to be on time and everything, but try to trick your mind into thinking you've still got a month to go."

"You think I've still got a month to go!" Emma wailed.

Anna looked back at the other girls. "I tried," she said wearily.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Danielle, one week past her first birthday, was getting her cast off today. Jacob, protective big brother that he was, wouldn't let her out of his sight, and even came into Lewis' office when it was time to take the cast off.

"Don't hurt her," Jacob said to Lewis defensively, "She's really little."

Lewis laughed. "I know, buddy, I'm gonna be really careful."

_As promised, Lewis _carefully_ sawed the cast off and presented it to Bella. "A keepsake?" he asked._

She glowered. "I think not."

Picking up her brave little girl who, despite the bad first experience, was walking well now, and setting her down next to Jacob, Bella breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now we can play rugby!" said Jacob excitedly to his little sister, "You can be the one who throws it, and I'll be the one that kicks it!"

Having yet to grasp the concept of rugby, and having only a barely-walking one-year-old to play with, Jacob quickly abandoned his fleeting fancy of being a rugby player.

__oOoOoOoOo__

_Ash, Zane, Ben and Will sped home in the motorboat that afternoon, as they did every day. As the breadwinners of the mermaid village,

the four of them still worked on the mainland and drove the boat to and from Mako every weekday._

"So Em's two weeks overdue, huh, Ash?" Ben asked.

"I know!" he exclaimed, "I feel so sorry for her. And it's weird too, seeing as it's our third. Eric and Lucy were both early, but Freckle just doesn't want to come."

"Is she getting crabby?" Zane asked with a laugh, "Rikki is, and she's only four months in!"

"She's handling it surprisingly well," Ash said, "But it must be getting hard. She's been carrying a person for nine and a half months!"

"How's Rikki doing?" Will asked Zane, "Amazing that it's twins again, huh?"

"I know! I guess after the initial shock of it, she's doing okay. To be honest she hasn't said much about it," Zane replied.

"So what are you guys thinking about Cleo's big plan for the island?" Ben asked, "It seems really smart to me. And that way the four of us don't have to keep commuting to and from the mainland every day."

"But then we won't be able to have our man talks," Will exclaimed with mock grief. The guys laughed.

__oOoOoOoOo__

_As Ash walked through the front door, he heard Emma crying. He rushed into the living room and found her sitting on the sofa with a book in her lap, sobbing inconsolably. _

"Emma, honey, what's the matter!" Ash ran to her side and hugged her tightly. "What's up?"

"I'm an elephant!" she bawled.

"Em, sweetie, I'm going to need a little more to work with than that," Ash said frankly.

"I was just reading this book," Emma said sadly, "About elephants. Did you know that the gestation period for an elephant is 22 months? I'm not far behind."

"Emma," Ash laughed, "You're not an elephant sweetie."

"Then why won't she come out?" Emma wailed hysterically.

Ash thought for a moment, then smiled.

"You know what I think it is, honey? I think Freckle only wants to stay inside you because you've created such a lovely home for her over the past nine months. She just loves you too much to come out yet."

_Emma looked at Ash lovingly. "Thank you," she whispered and leaned

in to kiss him tenderly. Emma pulled back, startled._

"What is it?" Ash asked anxiously.

"I think my water just broke," Emma gulped.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Twelve hours later

"Cleo," Lewis whispered, "Honey wake up!"

Cleo rolled over and looked at the clock. "Lewis it's four in the morning. Go away."

"Emma had her baby!"

Cleo swung her feet over the side of the bed. "I'm up," she groaned.

__oOoOoOoOo__

After nine months, two weeks, and finally twelve hours of labour, Freckle was finally out in the world.

Emma sat serenely in bed, holding her newborn daughter, rocking her gently and humming 'hush little baby'.

Cleo poked her head around the corner.

"Hey!" she said softly, "Is this Freckle?"

"Cleo," Emma looked up peacefully, "I'd like you to meet Arianna Grace Dove. Arianna, this is your aunt Cleo!"

"She's beautiful!" Cleo exclaimed, and came to sit on the bed next to Emma. "Squidge over."

"Do you want to hold her?" Emma asked. Cleo nodded and Emma gently transferred Arianna into Cleo's arms.

Ash came in and smiled again at his wife and newborn daughter. "Hey sweetie," he came over and kissed Emma and produced a bouquet of handpicked flowers from behind his back.

"Awwwâ€¦!" Cleo smiled.

"Do you want me to go wake up everyone else?" Ash asked quietly.

"Wait till the morning," Emma replied, gazing at her baby, "I don't want to disturb anyone."

Lewis came in, still dressed in scrubs and gloves. "I'm going to take her now, okay Emma? I just want to weigh and measure her."

Emma looked sad briefly, but nodded. Lewis whisked Arianna away to the next room. Emma pined after her.

_ "She's lovely Emma," Cleo sighed, "Well worth the wait, huh?" _

_ "Definitely," Emma smiled, "Definitely worth the wait." _

7. Episode Two, A Denman Dilemma: Part I

_ It was March. The leaves on the courtyard trees were beginning to change to golden. Baby Arianna was 3 weeks old and fitting in well to the little mermaid community. A week earlier, Arianna had revealed her power for the first time, causing it to snow in the village (despite it being the end of summer). The younger children had gotten very excited and made snow angels, however, as they got wet and turned into mermaids halfway through the process, these ended up more as snow-fish. _

_ Rikki, whose twins were due to be born in the middle of July, was often ill and had stopped work entirely since she found out she was pregnant. She spent most days resting outside in the hammock, watching Leila and Charlie play, wishing that she had the energy to do more. _

_ Bella was teaching music part-time again, and swam over twice a week to the mainland. She sometimes brought Jacob and Jennifer with her to school, and they relished the opportunity to be amongst the bigger kids. Jenny had turned four soon after Arianna's birth, and Jacob's birthday was at the end of the month. They were both very clever, and could read some of the simpler books in the school library. _

_ Anna often babysat for Bella when she was at work, and enjoyed looking after Danielle as well as Matthew and Thomas. The day before her 30th birthday, Anna had taken on a client, and was busy designing a luxury beach house, but found time to take both her sons swimming every day. _

_ Emma was managing her growing family well, and was very content and peaceful most days. She had left her teaching job permanently after the end of the previous school year to be a full-time mother, and loved the amount of time she got to spend with her kids. She had begun to teach Eric some basic reading and maths and he was learning fast in her capable hands. _

_ Cleo was a constant source of energy and imagination in the village. She was the driving force behind every aspect of the marine sanctuary, and was forever coming up with new ideas. She often had Max in a carry-seat on her back, as she moved too quickly and too often for the little guy to keep up. _

_ The village was constantly bustling with activity, and its 21 residents were forever talking, laughing and swimming. Life for the mermaids was going very well, and everything seemed to be falling into place. _

_ oOoOoOoOo _

_ Cleo ran along the beach with the usual enthusiasm, listening to the her favourite music. She lapped the entire island before coming back to their property. _

She paused, looking out onto the horizon. She thought she saw the flick of a tail, too big to be a fish, coming towards Mako. Cleo blinked and couldn't see anything anymore. She shook her head, thinking it must have been a trick of the light.

__oOoOoOoOo__

At dinner that evening, Cleo related the news to the rest of the gang. "I'm sure it was a tail," she finished

"You mean a mermaid tail?" Anna queried, sitting up straighter.

"I think so, and I know it wasn't any of us, because Ben was still at work, and all you guys were back in the village at that point."

"So do you think it's a new mermaid?" Rikki asked with a mouthful of mashed potato.

"Maybe," Cleo said, "I can't be sure, because it disappeared as soon as I blinked, but it really did look like it."

Just then, a knock at the door startled them all.

"Who could that be?" Ben asked concernedly, "Know one knows we live here, and anyone in their right mind who saw houses made of crystallized water would run!"

"I'll get it," Zane said, jumping up and walking quickly to the door.

He opened it, and a pretty girl smiled at him. She was wearing a blue tee shirt, khaki shorts and jandals, and her blond hair was blowing in the breeze.

"Hi," she said chirpily, "Is Rikki, Cleo or Emma there?"

"Uh, sure," Zane said warily, "I'll just go get them."

He walked back round to the dining room and frowned.

"Rikki, Emma, Cleo, she wants to see you," he said cautiously.

"Who is it?" Cleo asked.

"Not sureâ€¦!" Zane wrinkled his nose.

The three girls stood up, Emma helping Rikki up from her chair. They walked around to the front door and gasped at the vaguely familiar face.

"Hi," said the girl, "I'm Christie. Christie Denman."

8. Episode Two, A Denman Dilemma: Part II

"Come on in," Emma said cautiously. Christie and the three girls went and sat in the armchairs in the main living room.

"Denman?" Rikki questioned angrily.

"Linda Denman's my aunt," Christie explained, "She used to talk about you guys. Before the accident, at least."

Cleo, Emma and Rikki thought back to the last time they'd seen Doctor Denman. After being trapped by her at the moon pool, the three girls had turned on her, using their powers and seriously injuring the scheming marine biologist. She had been affected by a serious concussion and lost most of her memories, including all recollection of the mermaids.

"She told you about us?" Rikki yelled furiously, "About ourâ€|"

"Encounters with her," Cleo cut her off smoothly. She didn't want Rikki to end up telling Christie anything she didn't already know.

"You can drop the act, I know that you're mermaids," Christie said swiftly.

Rikki boiled with anger. "She TOLD you!"

_"Never directly," Christie said slowly, "She was just always bragging about her amazing discoveries about the three of you. She once said that you guys had a real "tail" to tell. Little innuendos. I figured it out myself. Of course, after the **accident**__â€|" Here Christie looked up slyly at the girls, who shifted uncomfortably. "After the accident she stopped mentioning you completely. But I always knew that there was somethingâ€| fishyâ€| about the three of you. So I came to check it out for myself."_

"Why, Christie?" Emma asked sadly, "Why can't you just leave us in peace? We've got a pretty good life going for us here. Please don't ruin it!"

"Oh hush," Christie said brusquely, "I'm not here to ruin your little happily ever after."

"Then why are you here?" Cleo asked a tad rudely.

"I wanted to be a mermaid too," Christie said bluntly, "And, after watching you guys, and listening to your conversations about the magical mystical moon pool, now I am one." She smiled cheekily.

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They decided to let Christie stay in the village for the time being. Although she wasn't very polite and seemed quite immature, the girls figured it was probably safer to have her there in the village rather than anywhere else. When they had built the village, they had put a second story on the main common building that had a guest room in it. Emma and Cleo were up there preparing the room. The sun was setting on Mako.

"Can you believe she's a mermaid?" Emma asked in a hushed tone, "It unbelievable."

"I knew I saw a tail out there this afternoon," Cleo whispered back, "I hope she doesn't give us away.""

Rikki, coming up the stairs with an armful of blankets, heard the end of this. "Puh-lease," she said, "Of course she'll tell someone. She's related to Denman, that evil, scheming, good-for-nothingâ€¦!""

"You don't know that," Emma said quickly, cutting off Rikki's muttering, "She might be nothing like her aunt.""

_"She's coming," said Cleo quietly, just as Christie bounded into the room. _

"Hey you guys!" she chirped, "Thanks for letting me stay here.""

"No problem," Emma smiled.

Christie sat down on the bed with a bounce and folded her legs underneath her.

"Christie," Cleo said with a slight frown, "How old are you?""

"Umâ€¦!" Christie said.

"Tell the truth," Rikki chided.

"Sixteen," Christie replied honestly.

The girls thought back to when they first became mermaids, at the same age as Christie. It felt like an age ago.

"Aren't your parents worried where you are?" Emma asked concernedly.

"Please," Christie said sarcastically, "Mum's on a business trip and I'm staying with the batty doctor.""

"I assume you're referring to Linda Denman?""

"Of course, who else?" Christie giggled.

"Look, Christie, you seem like you're going through some teen angst at the moment," Cleo said maturely, "Maybe becoming a mermaid wasn't the answer to your problems.""

"Do you realize how difficult your life is going to become?" Emma asked.

"It's no big deal. Plus it's really cool," Christie said, flicking her hair, "I'm such a good swimmer now! I bet I'll win the swimming sports next year.""

Cleo and Rikki exchanged a look. Wow, this girl had no idea what she'd gotten herself in to. Rikki slipped quietly out the door and down the stairs.

_ "Christie," Emma said gently, "You do know that you can't let anybody know you're a mermaid. Remember what your aunt tried to do to us? If anybody found out, they'd want to experiment on you. It'd ruin your life. You cannot tell anyone, or show anyone." _

_ Rikki came back with a glass of water, which she promptly tipped just a little bit of on Christie. _

_ Within ten seconds she'd transformed, and was lying on the floor with her tail sticking out the doorframe. _

_ "See how easy it is?" Rikki asked, "If someone spills something on you, if it rains, if you even walk too close to a pool and get splashed- Boom. Your secret will be revealed." _

_ Christie rolled her eyes. "I'll be careful," she said impatiently, "I'm not a child." _

_ "Don't you see?" Cleo implored her, "From the moment you stepped into that moon pool, your life changed irrevocably. You can never be who you used to be again. You need to start growing up and taking responsibility for yourself. It's too dangerous not to." _

_ "You have a lot to learn," Emma said gently, "We'll help you with as much of it as we can, but you have to promise us that you're going to be serious about this." _

_ Christie breathed in deeply. "I promise." _

9. Episode Two, A Denman Dilemma: Part III

_ March 14th 2019 _

_ Christie had been living in the mermaid village for a week. Despite the not-so-great first impression, she turned out to be an intuitive and hard-working girl who was fast becoming a great asset to the five young families. All the children adored her, and she soon took on the role of primary babysitter. _

_ Some days Christie looked after the girls' children so they could get housework done and have time to relax, but most days she had mermaid lessons with a few of the girls. _

_ Over the past week, she had learned the art of spill management, how to escape quickly if she accidentally got wet, what activities to avoid and how to deal with a full moon. She had heard their stories of mishaps, how their husbands had found out about them, the time Emma nearly died whilst moonstruck, and about Rikki's kidnapping experience. _

_ Every day, two of the girls would take her swimming in Mako's surrounding waters, and sometimes venture over to the mainland for ice cream. On one such occasion, Christie discovered her power for the first time. _

_ "It's probably time we headed back," Bella said, looking at her watch. _

_ Christie licked the last of her ice cream off the cone and threw it

into the nearest trashcan, which was a good 10 feet away, with perfect aim._

"Wow," Cleo exclaimed, "Do you play basketball or something?"

"I used to play a few years ago, and netball too, but I don't anymore," Christie replied.

The three girls walked along the beach till they found the secluded spot where they always left from. They dived into the water and swam quickly back to Mako.

As they neared the island, three hammerhead sharks suddenly cornered Christie. She panicked, having never encountered a shark before, and clenched her hands into tight fists in front of her.

Time slowed to a near halt, and Christie was the only thing moving. The sharks stared at her beady-eyed, but moved no closer. Cleo and Bella, up ahead of her, were motionless, suspended in the water.

_Christie swam at full speed back to the island and collapsed on the shoreline. She looked out at the ocean. The waves weren't even moving. Only then did she release her clenched fists. _

The ocean began to move again, waves slowly rolling into the shore. Suddenly Cleo and Bella surfaced and swam over to where Christie was lying on the sand.

"What was that!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

_"I think it was meâ€¦" Christie marveled, looking at her hands.

_

"I think we've discovered your power," smiled Bella.

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_Rikki sat on the floor, painting her toenails a startling shade of red. Leila and Charlie were drawing peacefully in the corner, murmuring to each other and giggling mischievously. _

_Abruptly, Rikki cringed, gripped with a startling pain. She clutched her stomach protectively, and the pain receded. _

_A few minutes later, she cried out as she felt it again. Rikki grimaced, confused. It felt somewhat like contractions, but at the same time very different. The pain was shocking, like electrocution or something. _

_Rikki shifted uncomfortably and breathed deeply. She felt slightly feverish, so told the girls to run over and play at Cleo's house for the afternoon. _

_Rikki got hotter and hotter, and ran outside to cool off. She was sweating and panting from internal heat. Then all of a sudden, her blood ran cold. She shivered as a chill ran through her. Her temperature was fluctuating rapidly, and she had absolutely no idea why. _

The pain slowly subsided and her temperature returned to normal, but Rikki felt undeniably queasy for the rest of the afternoon.

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The following day was Emma's 30th birthday, and the girls were planning a surprise party for her. During the day, Christie looked after Eric, Lucy and Arianna while Ash took Emma out for a romantic day on the mainland.

After going to the stables and riding along the beach that morning, Ash took Emma to a romantic restaurant for lunch.

"I love you so much," he said sweetly, "Happy Birthday."

Emma smiled and kissed him across the table.

"Now," he said mischievously, "Present time."

"Ash, you know you didn't have to!" Emma exclaimed.

"Nonsense, of course I did," he laughed, and handed her a long thin box and an envelope. "Box first,"

She gently untied the white ribbon and tore open the light blue wrapping paper to reveal a jewelers box. She opened it to reveal a fine white gold bracelet with five tiny diamond tails on it.

Emma gasped. "It's so beautiful! And the tails! Oh Ash, thank you."

He smiled warmly. "And now the envelope."

She laughed, fastening the bracelet on her wrist, "Nothing could top this."

Inside were two plane tickets to Paris.

_"Okay, something ****can****__ top this!" she exclaimed._

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_Meanwhile, back on the island, chaos was ensuing. Anna's grand plan for a Cinderella-style ball involved transforming the whole village into a fairytale paradise. _

Will and Ben were stringing thousands of fairy lights across every tree surrounding the mermaid village, and Jacob kept tangling himself up in the excess electrical cord. Eventually, to prevent electrocution, the decision was made to banish all mobile children from the village while preparations were in progress. Christie led the troops down to the beach, where she directed a sandcastle building competition.

_Cleo and Rikki were in charge of beautifying the "grand hall" and set to work arranging long-stemmed white roses in tall elegant vases, draping white silk from the staircase banisters and clearing the living room, or as it was hence to be known, the ballroom, for

dancing. Rikki's constant frustration that "everything was white!" climaxed in an unfortunate tomato-sauce-meets-white-silk incident for which Anna fired her from the beautifying committee._

Bella was organizing the music for the evening, and was compiling a CD of old-fashioned Baroque ballroom orchestrals to accompany the evening's dancing, but couldn't find a blank CD to put it onto. Her decision to write over Will's favourite old Beatles CD resulted in a huge blowout between the two of them, and they didn't talk for the rest of the afternoon.

Lewis and Zane spent the day in the kitchen, preparing, as per Anna's request, an "authentic Elizabethan meal", which, much to their chagrin, was 10 courses long, including hors d'oeuvres, three appetizers, two main courses, a fruit and cheese platter, a dessert and two palate cleansers. Their battle with the pate was quite comical.

Anna ran around madly, dictating to everyone and micro-managing every detail of the evening. She ended up in tears twice, and Rikki's obsession with "that huge vein on Anna's forehead that keeps throbbing when she yells" didn't make matters any better.

_Despite the tumult and turmoil, by five o'clock, the village looked amazingly beautiful. The ice sculpture that Ben created was just wonderful, and the mermaid village, draped in silk and twinkle lights, looked like a fairytale. _

With everything finished but the last bits of cooking, everyone went to go get dressed in their ball finery.

10. Episode Two, A Denman Dilemma: Part IV

Emma swam back slowly to Mako, savoring the beautiful blue waters and complete peace. Ash would meet her at the moon pool when she got back.

Today had been amazing. Emma felt incredibly happy as she neared the entrance to the moon pool.

_As she surfaced, she gasped. The moon pool cave was decorated in white roses and twinkle lights, and cast the illusion of a fairytale castle. _

She quickly got out of the pool and dried herself with the huge white towel folded by the edge of the pool. As her tail disappeared, she saw out of the corner of her eye a sparkle of blue.

Hanging in the corner of the cave, surrounded by twinkling lights, was the most beautiful dress Emma had ever seen. It was the deepest royal blue, with a full ball gown skirt, and tiny shimmering gold jewels embroidered on the bodice. Emma sighed at its beauty.

_Stripping out of her white blouse and khaki shorts, Emma replaced them with the gown, lacing up the back carefully. She slipped her dainty feet into the glass slippers, which of course fit perfectly. She shivered as she put them on, realizing that they were made, not of glass but of permanently frozen ice. Emma laughed. How

appropriate._

Emma ran her fingers through her hair, which was curling prettily from the salt, and pinned it back with the ornate combs from on the rock ledge.

"Wow," a voice behind her said.

Emma spun around and smiled at Ash. He was dressed in an old-fashioned tuxedo, complete with tails and gloves.

"You look beautiful," he said. He presented her with a tiny bouquet and, as she looked at the flowers, she began to cry.

"What is it?" Ash asked concernedly.

"How did you know?" Emma asked tenderly, "I've never told anyone. You're the only person to have given me edelweiss. How did you find out?"

"You sing it to Arianna every night," Ash laughed, "Don't think I don't listen."

She ran over, despite the glass slippers, and kissed him passionately. "I love you so much, Ash Dove," she whispered into his ear.

"Me too," he said, "Now hurry, we're gonna be late!"

"Late for what?" Emma asked.

_He scooped her up in his arms and carried her out of the moon pool cave. A beautiful white horse waited outside. Ash swung Emma onto the saddle and led the horse down the path to the mermaid village. _

As they entered the courtyard, Emma's eyes widened excitedly. "What theâ€¦" She breathed, "Did you guys do all this?"

"It was Anna mostly. She got inspired," Ash said with a grin, "Welcome to your castle, CinderEmma!"

oOoOoOoOoOo

The evening was beautiful. The meal went off without a hitch, and Zane and Lewis were praised for their excellent Elizabethan cooking.

"In fact," Cleo said excitedly, "You guys should cook more often!"

_Lewis groaned. _

"Never do anything well," Zane muttered to Lewis, "Or you run the risk of being asked to do it again."

As the evening progressed and the ball began, Emma marveled again at the amazing evening her friends had created. Everyone looked so beautiful too.

_Cleo wore a sunshine yellow dress that befitted her bright

personality. Her brown hair fell in a waterfall down her back, and she had pinned a few daisies into her curls. Lewis wore a matching yellow tie with his black tails, and seemed unusually at home on the dance floor._

Rikki was in a scarlet gown with an empire waistline that subtly accentuated her growing baby bump. Despite still feeling ill, Rikki looked rosy and pretty this evening, and wore her hair pinned up with a red rose in the back. Zane, like Lewis, wore a coordinating red tie.

Anna, who had calmed down since that morning, looked fresh and summery in a bright green gown. Her straightened red hair fell in a sheet over her shoulders, and her three-inch lime green heels made her close to her husband's height. Ben wore a lime green tie and a relaxed smile.

Bella looked beautiful in a shimmery violet dress that fell straight to the floor. She had her hair swept up elegantly, pinned back with a cluster of white lilies. Will, who had forgiven his earnest wife for this morning's mishap, was tall and handsome in tails and a purple tie and danced like a gentlemen with Bella in his arms.

But it was the birthday girl who took your breath away. In the beautiful deep blue ball gown, with the edelweiss in clustered in her blond curls, Emma looked every bit an Elizabethan princess. She and Ash swept gracefully around the dance floor, every bit as in love as when they were newlyweds.

_Bella's especial mix of Baroque music made the evening seem authentic, and the beautiful hall decorations cast the illusion of a castle. _

The evening was going wonderfully well, and everyone was having a fantastic time.

Suddenly, Rikki collapsed.

11. Episode Two, A Denman Dilemma: Part V

Zane carried Rikki in his arms to Lewis' office, and laid her on the bed tenderly. She was fluttering in and out of consciousness, and Zane watched her anxiously as Lewis got into his gloves and scrubs.

Lewis did a comprehensive medical analysis of Rikki's condition. After taking her vital signs, blood pressure, scans of the babies and a MRI to check for cranial damage, Lewis finished his assessment and sat looking through the results

_By this time, Rikki had fully regained consciousness, thrown up four times and changed colour from red to white to green to blue and back to red. Now an almost normal shade of puce, Rikki was propped up by the three pillows Bella had gotten for her, and was holding Zane's hand. _

"Hey," she croaked softly to Zane.

"How you doing, hon?" he asked anxiously.

_ "A bit better," she said with a slight smile, "Has Lewis found out anything yet?"_

_ "Yes, I'm just reviewing it once more," Lewis called over. _

_ Lewis looked at the information he had gathered and shook his head in disbelief. _

_ "Well, Rikki," he said as he walked over to the bed, "This is quite unprecedented. It appears that your unborn babies are causing this illness."_

_ "What?" Rikki laughed, "How?"_

_ "They appear to be using their powers inadvertently, creating fluctuations in your blood temperature and sending pulses of electrical charge through your body. These are weakening your immune system and draining your body of its energy. The constant change in blood temperature, combined with the effects of the electrical current, is having a severe adverse effect on your body."_

_ "So what does that mean?" Rikki asked nervously._

_ "Basically that your unborn children are making you extremely ill. With a weakened immune system and continuous fatigue, I'd say the best thing for you right now is constant bed rest until these babies are born," Lewis said grimly, "There's nothing really we can do to prevent them from using their powers, but we can make you much less uncomfortable by avoiding all strenuous occupation."_

_ "Four months of bed rest!" Rikki moaned._

_ "It looks like we don't have a choice," Lewis said solemnly._

_ Emma, who had stayed vigilantly at Rikki's side for the hours of testing, spoke up. "I have an idea," she said cautiously, "I don't know if it could work, but I think we could give it a shot. If I used my powers to counter the effects of the babies' heat power- to cool down Rikki's blood temperature, and if Cleo used her power to remold the fluid around their hands- to prevent them from making a fist and creating electricity. Well, then, maybe we could keep the babies from hurting Rikki."_

_ Lewis pondered this for a minute. "It would be extremely difficult," he said, "And incredibly dangerous for the foetuses. But it's plausible."_

_ oOoOoOoOoOo_

A few hours later- about 2am on 16th March

_ "Are you sure you're fine to do this?" Lewis asked Rikki, "There is a risk of losing the babies."_

_ Rikki gulped and fought back tears. "I'm sure," she said._

_ "Alright," Lewis said professionally, "Emma, you ready?"_

Emma nodded and flexed her hand.

"Cleo?"

"Yeah, I'm ready," she replied.

"Okay," Lewis said, "Emma, begin cooling."

_Emma slowly brought her fingers closer together, being careful to only change the temperature of Rikki's blood minutely, so as not to shock her veins. _

Lewis, who was carefully monitoring every action with an IV and a thermometer, instructed Emma. "Alright, just a little moreâ€|. Stop."

"Cleo, your turn. Just bring all four fists completely together so that nothing can be further changed."

_Cleo carefully manipulated the fluid around the four little hands, making them fully clench into fists. As she did this, Rikki's blood temperature rose dramatically, and a pulse of electricity shocked the IV. _

"Emma, quickly," Lewis yelled, "Cool again."

Emma cooled Rikki's blood to normal temperature as Cleo sealed the babies' fists in place. It was finished.

_Suddenly, Lewis noticed that the monitor wasn't picking up the babies' heartbeats. _

"Rikki," he said gravely, "I'm not getting any heartbeat."

"What?" she asked quietly. It took a minute to sink in. Rikki felt like her heart was breaking right down the middle. She did all she could from bursting into tears right then and there.

_Suddenly, the monitor jolted and started to show two distinctive heartbeats. _

_"Thank goodness," Emma nearly cried. She and Cleo ran over and hugged Rikki. _

Zane kissed Rikki tenderly, and rubbed her stomach gently.

"It's okay," Rikki breathed, "Everyone's okay."

12. Episode Three, Luck o the Irish: Part I

A few days later

Rikki and the babies were doing fine. Despite the success of the procedure, Lewis' recommendation of constant bed rest was still heeded to help her body recover and nurture the babies. Not being able to do much physically, Rikki leaned the beauty of stillness, and the patience that comes with it.

oOoOoOoOo

_I cannot feel that I have done by duty as humble historian of the mermaid community without devoting at least one chapter to the newest and most important members of it. _

In the little mermaid village now lived 11 children under the age of five. A bright-natured, skilled and intelligent group, the mer-children lived content, imaginative and a little bit spoiled lives, for the entire community was committed to their constant happiness, thus rendering them overindulged but utterly delightful children.

_Leila and Charlie, the whirlwind duo, were incredibly imaginative, and played pretend the whole day long. They were mischievous, cheeky and adorable, and knew very well that they could get away with anything. Though identical twins, the two could not have differed more in personality. _

Charlie was outspoken, tomboyish and sporty. She was a keen sportswoman, played soccer and basketball well, swam confidently without grown ups and was a cheerful and talkative companion. She and Jake were friends and rivals, constantly engaged in fierce athletic competition.

Leila, on the other had, was quiet, feminine and playful. She adored her older-by-ten-minutes sister immensely, and quite worshipped her every move. Leila liked to draw, play with her dolls and dance around the house. She was less outgoing than Charlie, and preferred to use her mermaid abilities only when Rikki was around.

Jake, as the oldest male, was protective and defensive of all the younger children. Quick to mediate any discrepancies, and equally loving of all "his little ones", Jake was the peaceful and masculine leader of the gang. Like his mother, Jake was musical and swam incredibly well. He was the first of the children to be able to swim unassisted to the mainland.

_ Danielle was an energetic and colourful soul, who had a cheeky grin and a distractible nature. Agile and fidgety, Dannie was fast becoming a gymnast, and spent many days with her legs tucked behind her shoulders. At 13 months, Dannie was now walking easily, and she had completely forgotten about her broken arm._

Thomas, at six months, was beginning to sit up by himself and smiled easily at everyone. A sociable baby, he cooed at everything and everyone, and readily showed off his few emerging teeth. He spent most days happily bouncing in his swing seat, and watched excitedly all the goings-on around him. Signs of his mother's fiery red hair were showing through, and the adorable ginger baby was a favourite in the village.

Matthew's delightful broken conversation entranced all who spoke to him, and he was eager to make the 'gowwen-upz' laugh. Matthew was quickly growing into an athletic little boy, and liked to play soccer and cricket in the back yard. He was a capable swimmer and constantly used his powers to melt ice-cubes and freeze them again, much to his delight.

Eric was an extremely polite little boy, and was regarded by many as the gentleman of the village. He would open doors for all the girls, and pretended to be the knight in shining armour to save his friends from whatever malady befell them. A few months short of his third birthday, Eric was already one of the brightest children in the village, knowing how to read easy books and being able to count up to 100.

_Lucy was a quiet and affectionate little girl who liked to sing in her lispy toddler voice, and met everyone with the melodic greeting "Lo! Lo!" She was endearingly sweet, and crawled onto the lap of everyone she encountered. One of the most beloved inhabitants of the village, Lucy adored everyone and everything in her world, and each morning opened the window to cry out to the world "Mo-ning!"

—

Arianna, a blue-eyed and attentive baby, was constantly lavished in affection by her two older siblings. A very alert and happy baby, Arianna was entranced by the world around her, and marveled at the constant bustle of the mermaid village. She loved to use her powers, and Emma spent a lot of the day cleaning up fallen snow inside.

Jennifer was fast inheriting her mother's energy and creativity, and could often be heard saying, "I've got a good idea!" The eldest child in the village, she had tendencies towards bossiness and dominance, but balanced these out with a sweet nature and charming smile. A budding artist who constantly changed media, Jenny was currently going through a painting stage and never left home without her beret and paintbrushes.

Max was a complacent and relaxed little boy, often having to settle for following Cleo around everywhere. He had begun to imitate Jennifer in many things, copying her sketches and mimicking her turns of phrase. He had learned the word 'no' and was making frequent use of this knowledge. But Max was a very darling boy, and his easy-going nature endeared him to all.

The children were a very close-knit bunch, and adored each other. Their individual quirks made them unique and special, but their attitude of camaraderie made them an interdependent unit that was a great asset to the village.

13. Episode Three, Luck o the Irish: Part II

Christie had now been living with the mermaids for nearly two weeks, and was beginning to get homesick.

"Hey, Christie, don't you have school to worry about?" Bella asked her one day.

"Well, sorta," Christie replied, "While mum's in Hong Kong for business, I've been staying with Aunt Linda, and so I've had a few weeks off school. Mum cleared it with the teachers and everything. But she gets back this Saturday, which means I have to go home really soon. Although I've loved being here, I'm kinda glad to go home soon. I really miss it."

_The next morning, March 21st, Christie departed from the mermaid

village. The parting was tearful, for although they had only known her a few weeks, the girls would miss Christie a lot. The children had all grown very attached to her, and clung to her legs as she left. _

"I promise to visit!" she said to them, "The next school holidays, I'll be here."

"Be careful," Cleo said.

"And sensible," Emma added.

"And don't you dare tell anyone," Rikki chided.

Emma and Cleo walked Christie down to the moon pool and swam with her to the outer waters of Mako. They waved goodbye as she swam off into the distance, then flew back through the water to the moon pool.

"She really left," said Cleo sadly.

"It'll be weird without her here," Emma agreed.

Anna, Bella and Rikki came in the entrance to the moon pool.

"Hey," Bella said sadly, "You guys doing okay?"

The five girls sat for a while with their tails dangling in the water. Their new friend had left just as quickly as she'd come. Christie seemed like she completed the group perfectly. All five girls inherently knew that her presence was important. But they didn't know when they'd see her again.

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April 8th 2019

"Rikki Tikki Tembo!" Anna called, knocking on Rikki's front door, "Are you there?"

"Just a minute," Rikki called from inside. She hauled herself up from the sofa and began to walk towards the door.

_Suddenly she heard mischievous giggles behind her. She spun round quickly and eyeballed her cheeky twins. Leila and Charlie assumed childlike expressions with innocent eyes. _

"Charlieâ€|?" Rikki said suspiciously.

"Yes mamma?" Charlie replied sweetly, pretending to be innocent.

"Leilaâ€|?" Rikki turned to her other daughter.

"Yes mamma?" Leila replied even more sweetly, but stifled a giggle at the end.

_Rikki squinted skeptically at them. "Be good," she chided. They nodded demurely, then returned to whatever havoc they were wreaking.

—

Rikki shook her head at her naughty girls, and then walked down the hall to answer the door.

"Hey Anna," Rikki said, somewhat breathlessly, for even the short walk down the hall was exhausting in her fragile state.

Anna held up a large brown paper bag. "Lunch," she smiled.

_"God bless you, Anna Charles!" Rikki exclaimed. She hadn't eaten anything since dinner last night, mostly because she couldn't be bothered to make any food. Rikki didn't really mind, because she didn't have much of an appetite at the moment anyway, but she felt bad to not feed her daughters. _

"Cheeky monsters!" she called to Leila and Charlie, "Lunch!"

_The two girls came running at her and hugged Aunty Anna joyfully. They opened the brown bag and hauled out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and chocolate chip cookies. _

_Rikki went down to the kitchen and poured four glasses of milk. She left two on the counter for Leila and Charlie, handed one to Anna and took a big slurp from her own. _

_"You're a lifesaver, Anna!" Rikki said gratefully with a mouth full of BLT sandwich. _

"I know," Anna said sweetly.

"I'm just too tired to cook at the moment," Rikki explained embarrassedly, "I'm such a bad mother."

_"No you're not!" Anna laughed, "But if you're really worried, I'm truly happy to have Leila and Charlie come over for breakfast and lunch. You need rest! Even with the babies not using their powers anymore, they're still impacting you hugely. No one ever said pregnancy was easy, not even with _normal _babies. And you've got twin mermaids!" _

Rikki smiled gratefully at Anna. She was glad she had such amazing friends to look after her. She didn't know how she'd cope otherwise.

_Rikki and Anna suddenly heard an explosion in the living room. Rikki groaned. _

"Leila Mary and Charlie Allison, get in here right now!" she yelled.

"Yes mamma?" they said in unison.

__oOoOoOoOo__

_Emma sat cross-legged on the floor with Lucy in her lap and Eric across from her. Baby Arianna was sleeping in her cot on the far side of the room. _

"Mamma," Eric said thoughtfully, "Why is the sky blue?"

_Emma pondered this for a minute. Her son was incredibly intuitive and curious, but his questions were always difficult to answer. She knew why the sky was blue, but in a grown-up way explaining the scattering of different wavelengths. She didn't think that Eric, even as intelligent as he was, would get this, being a three-year old.

_

"Well," she said creatively, "At the very beginning of time when God created the world, the fairies decided that blue was the calmest of colours. They wanted the world to be a peaceful place, and since the sky is the biggest thing in the earth, they made it the most peaceful of colours. And that's why the sky is blue."

Eric accepted this answer readily, and Emma smiled at her storytelling skills. Little did she know that there was a great truth behind what she's just told her son. But none of the girls yet knew about fairies, so Emma assumed her tale was simply a means of satisfying her son's curiosity with a sweet story. She stroked Lucy's soft blond hair gently.

"Mamma," Eric asked, persisting with his inquiry, "Do you know any fairies?"

"No, sweetie, I don't," Emma said, "I wish I did though. But the only fairies I know are you and Lucy and Arianna. You're all my sweet angels and my darling fairies."

"Okay mamma," Eric said, his naïve curiosity satisfied temporarily.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Anna backed out of the nursery slowly. They were asleep. Anna exhaled, relieved and exhausted. She ran her fingers through her long red hair and slipped into a pair of flip-flops.

_She ran with speed over to the other side of Mako to look at the building site. _

_"Hi honey!" Ben said cheerfully, kissing Anna. He passed her a hardhat not dissimilar to his own. _

"How's it going?" she asked excitedly.

"Well," Ben said, "The foundation's been laid, and the first of the framing is going up tomorrow."

"Wow," Anna breathed, "It's really happening! It's amazing to see it take shape."

Having to use human building methods this time around, the build would take 8 months, and should be finished just in time for the New Year. Everyone was very excited, but none more so than Anna, whose architectural tendencies rendered her incredibly obsessed with the whole building process.

30th April 2019

Bella and Anna sat by the edge of the moon pool, dangling their tails in the water.

Bella sighed.

"What's up?" Anna asked her.

"I don't know, it's justâ€¦" Bella trailed off.

"Tell me," Anna persisted.

"I just feel soâ€¦ restless," Bella admitted.

_"I get what you mean," Anna said, "Sometimes I feel like I need to escape for a bit." _

Suddenly, Bella sat up. "Do you want to swim to Ireland with me?" she asked Anna abruptly.

"What?" Anna laughed, "We can't swim all the way to Ireland!"

"Why not? I did it a few years ago when I went to my aunt's funeral, remember? I bet that with our swimming ability as mermaids we'd make it easily in a few days. I just need to escape for a little while, return to my roots."

"Well," Anna said, "It would be a nice break. But we couldn't just up and leave like that! What about the kids?"

"Cleo and Emma can take care of them! And you're forgetting we both have very competent husbands," Bella persisted, "Come on, Anna, it'll be fun! It won't be for long, just a week or so."

"Wellâ€¦" Anna said uncertainly.

Bella looked at her with pleading eyes.

"You're insane," Anna said, "But okay. We at least have to tell everyone we're leaving."

Bella smiled mischievously. "Yay!"

oOoOoOoOoOo

Early the next morning

"I love you very much," Anna said tearfully to Matthew, "And I'm very proud to be your mother."

She hugged him tightly, then kissed Thomas' sleeping forehead. "Love you, Tom!"

Saying goodbye to Ben was hardest. "We'll be back soon!" she promised, "I'll miss you so much though. I love you."

"You too," he said softly. They kissed, and then Anna lowered herself into the moon pool and transformed.

Bella clung to Jake and Dannie for a few minutes. She kissed them both and squeezed them tight. "Love you guys!" she said sweetly.

She stood up and took Will's hand. "I love you," she said sadly, "This is just something I have to do."

_ "I know," he said, "I love you too. Be careful." They kissed tenderly, and then Bella joined Anna in the moon pool. As she transformed, the two girls waved to their families. _

_ "You ready?" Anna asked Bella. She nodded, and the two swam out of the moon pool and into the sea. The sun was going up on the horizon.

_

It would take them a full 48 hours to get to Ireland if they swam non-stop, but they planned to rest on an island near Chile that evening before going around the bottom of South America, and again in Morocco the next night. The journey would be long and hard, but Anna and Bella were experienced and had the motivation to make the trip easily.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Isla Mocha

It was evening. The night breeze tossed through the long grasses on the coast of Mocha Island. There was not a soul in sight. Ironical, this being the island where the ancient Mapuche believed dead souls traveled to be resurrected.

_Suddenly, a human head surfaced in the choppy sea. It shook out its blond hair and looked toward the black sand beaches. _

Another girl bobbed up next to her. The latter, a redhead, breathed in deeply. "Hey Bella! Is this Mocha already?"

_ "Hi Anna. Yup, this is it," Bella replied, "I'm so tired."_

_The two mermaids swam to shore and collapsed, exhausted, on the sand. _

A few minutes later, Anna got up and began to search for a place to sleep. A hollowed out cave by the shoreline provided adequate refuge, and the two girls, having dried off and transformed back into humans, built a small campsite.

It was a cool evening with a brisk wind, so Anna heated some water to beyond boiling and the two mermaids sat by the makeshift 'fire'.

_ "We have to be back in time for Will's birthday on the 9th," Bella mused, somewhat to Anna, but mostly to herself, "So that meansâ€¦. We'll leave Ireland on the 6thâ€¦. And we'll get there about noon on 2ndâ€¦ Which meansâ€¦. We'll have three and a half daysâ€¦ hmmmâ€¦ Oh, but we crossed the international date line, so today's the 30th not the 1st, which means we'll arrive on the 2nd, but we'll have to leave on the 5th because crossing the international date line on the way home means we go forward a day."_

_Anna was half asleep and curled up in a wooly sweater. "Uh-huh," she said sleepily, not really listening to Bella's ramblings, "Night, night, Isabella." _

_Bella looked up and realized Anna was asleep. She rolled her eyes. Too exhilarated to sleep herself, Bella got up and began to wander along the coastline. _

_Standing up on a cliff, she could faintly see the lights of the mainland in the distance, and imagined the sounds of South American music floating through the air. _

_Bella thought about the real reason she wanted to go to Ireland, and shook her head at her impulsiveness. At least she had brought Anna along with her for safety's sake. _

_Bella thought about her kids, safe and warm in their beds at home. She missed them already. _

_Bella thought about Will. How he would have discouraged her from going if he'd known her motivation. How much he cared about her.

_

_Bella thought about home, her home with the mermaid village, and her home in Ireland. _

Bella thought.

She shivered and hugged her fleece tighter, and walked back to the campsite.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Mako Island

"What would I give if I could live out of these waters?" Cleo sang dramatically, pretending to swim through the living room.

"What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand?" Emma joined in melodically, falling back and pretending to sunbathe on the recliner.

"Betcha on land, they understand, bet they don't reprimand their daughters!" Rikki crooned, well out of tune but enjoying herself immensely.

"Bright young women! Sick of swimming! Ready to stand!" the girls sang theatrically.

_The three collapsed into giggles on the floor of Rikki's living room. _

"How come we never watched this before?" Emma exclaimed, beside herself with laughter.

"I know, it's so fitting!" Cleo said jubilantly.

_Cleo and Emma, intent on cheering up the bedridden Rikki, had come over for an all-girls sleepover, and the three of them were watching

the Little Mermaid, huddled up in Rikki's living room with sleeping bags, popcorn and licorice. _

"Oh Ariel," Rikki sighed, "We know your pain! But the seaweed isn't much greener up here on our lake!"

_Cleo and Emma laughed hysterically at Rikki's melodrama. _

While Ariel sang away in the background, the three girls curled up in their sleeping bags.

"This is just like old times," Cleo sighed happily, "Before all the weddings and babies and islands and stuff."

"I miss it," Rikki said sadly.

"Hey," Emma said softly, coming over and hugging Rikki's shoulders, "I know it's hard, and I know you've got it the hardest of any of us, but I also know how much you love Leila and Charlie, and little Thing One and Thing Two. You wouldn't give up your current life to be sixteen again, would you?"

"Noooooâ€¦!" Rikki said slowly, "But I do wish that I could have a few days that don't revolve around sonograms and finger painting."

"Haha, don't we all," Cleo laughed.

"I wonder how Anna and Bella are doing?" Emma mused, "It was weird them leaving so suddenly."

"I know!" Rikki agreed, "It's not like either of them to take off so quickly, with almost no warning."

"I think it was Bella," Cleo said pensively, "Have you guys noticed that she's seemed a bitâ€¦ aloofâ€¦ these past few days? Weeks, even."

"I'm not sure what's up with her," Emma agreed, "She just seemed so lost in thought. I hope she's not going to do anything rash."

"Come on, Em!" Rikki exclaimed, "Not everything in life has to be safe and calculated and risk-free!"

Emma pouted. "I was just saying."

Cleo laughed at her two friends. "Just watch the movie," she giggled.

They turned their attention back to Ariel, whose longing for liberty had now led her into danger's path. The girls spoke no further, but all had the same thought- what if Bella was falling into the same situation as Ariel?

15. Episode Three, Luck o the Irish: Part IV

Casablanca, Morocco

_ "Do you want to go into the town?" Anna asked Bella as they sat on the beach near Casablanca. It was evening, and the warm Moroccan breeze drifted pleasantly in from the Atlantic. They had swum quickly that day, and arrived in Casablanca a few hours earlier than planned. Neither Bella nor Anna was tired, so they decided to go explore the iconic town._

_ The two girls walked through the bustling city, taking in the sights and sounds of North Africa._

_ Suddenly, as they turned a corner, Anna burst out laughing. _

_ "Of all the gin joints in the town!" she exclaimed._

_ Bella, confused, whirled around to see a neon sign broadcasting Rick's Café. She snorted with a huge grin on her face. "Gosh I love this place."_

_ oOoOoOoOoOo_

_ "Emma," Rikki called out cautiously, "I think you should come see this."_

_ Rikki was standing in Bella's room with a book in her hand._

_ Emma came in with baby Arianna in a sling. "Hey Rikki," she smiled, then frowned, "What are you doing in here- we shouldn't be snooping through Bella's stuff."_

_ "Look what I found," Rikki said quietly, showing Emma the book. She flipped to the inside cover and showed Emma the inscription._

_ "Oh my," Emma exclaimed, "We should show Cleo."_

_ "What, you're not going to say I told you so?" Rikki asked cheekily._

_ "No," Emma said gravely, "Because Bella and Anna's safety- and sanity- is more important than winning an argument."_

_ They walked out of the Benjamins' house and over to Cleo's._

_ "But yes, I did tell you so," Emma added cheekily, poking her tongue out a tiny bit at Rikki. _

_ "Cleo," Rikki called, "Are you there?"_

_ After a minute, Cleo bounced out. She had flour all through her hair and a smudge of chocolate down her cheek. She was wearing a flour-covered apron, and embarrassedly closed the door as she came out._

_ "Um, Cleo?" Emma questioned her appearance._

_ "Oh," Cleo said self-consciously, "I was making brownies. Attempting to make brownies is probably a better description."_

_ "So look what I found in Bella's nightstand drawer," Rikki exclaimed._

"You went through her drawers?" Emma cried out, then calmed, "Sorry, go on."

_Cleo examined the old book. It had fraying leather edges and antique pages. Down the worn spine was written _"Beasts of the Ages_" and in smaller script beneath it "_A complete compendium of the modern and historical creatures of our world_". O'Flaherty was the author's name._

"Inside cover," Emma told her quietly.

_ Cleo opened the book and read aloud the inscription._

"My dearest Bella. Let not the things that make you different from others keep you from becoming who you are destined to be. You possess within you a great power to change the world- never settle for less than your dreams. In times when you realize you have lost something of yourself, return to that which made you who you are. I shall always be here should you need me. Until we meet again, may you be held in the palm of God's hand. Best of luck to youâ€¦" Cleo read, "Its signed M."

_Arianna cooed and Cleo made a silly face for her. _

"Well!" Rikki exclaimed, "Are we going to go get them?"

"Why?" Cleo asked, "They don't appear to be in any harm. Bella just wants to 'return to that which made her who she is' and pay a visit to this M. And besides, she's got Anna with her for safety. What could go wrong?"

__oOoOoOoOo__

Dublin, Ireland, about 4pm

Anna's stomach rumbled. "Bella..." she moaned, "When are we going to eat? Where are we going to stay? Why didn't we plan anything!"

"I did plan something," Bella smiled, and hailed a taxi, "An old friend of mine will look after us while we're here. You'll love him, he's really nice."

_ "Gibblockstown please," Bella said to the driver._

__oOoOoOoOo__

_Cleo sat cross-legged in the large armchair, flicking through _Beasts of the Ages_. She stopped on the first page, reading through the author's note. He wrote about the protection of magical creatures and several funds to help endangered species. He signed off with the same scrawled M as in the inscription to Bella. Cleo frowned at this. Bella knew the author? Below was printed neatly Maeleachlainn O'Flaherty._

"May-uh-lee-uh-klaynâ€¦" Cleo said to herself, "Huh, strange name."

She flicked through to the table of contents.

Introduction- Fantastical Creatures

Classifications Key

Chapter One- Centaur

Chapter Two- Phoenix

Chapter Three- Leprechaun

Chapter Four- Troll

Chapter Five- Mermaid

Chapter Six- Griffin

Chapter Seven- Dragon

Chapter Eight- Pegasus

Chapter Nine- Sea Creature (see also Loch Ness Monster)

Chapter Ten- Fairy

Conclusion

Cleo's eyes widened at some of these names. Okay, so sure, she knew that mermaids existed, but she'd never really thought beyond that. It suddenly made sense that, of course, mermaids were not the only 'mythical' creatures to exist. Cleo shook her head at her ignorance.

First she opened the book to the middle, chapter five. Mermaids. It intrigued her to see what this Maeleachlainn had to say about her.

***Mermaid**

Habitat: Sea, Ocean

Biological Classification: Contrary to popular belief, mermaids are not human-fish crosses, but rather humanoid creatures that possess Cetacean genes. Like other Cetacean mammals (for instance dolphins), mermaids have tails that are horizontal and move vertically. This is because a cetacean spine bends in the same manner as a human spine, which predisposes humans to be compatible genetically with dolphins.

Conservation Status: Endangered.

The mermaid, once seen in abundance throughout the world, has sadly grown more and more endangered over the years. This is due to the human fascination with mermaids, which lead to the murder of hundreds of mer-people during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The mermaid species has also been under attack since the 1830s Great War, where battles with Sea Creatures saw the death of many brave mermaid warriors. What few mermaids still exist and thrive in our world live in seclusion and shy away from communication with other magical creatures. I myself have only had the pleasure of meeting one mermaid.

Creation: There are two ways for a mermaid to come into existence. The first, and more likely, is when a human undergoes transformation. This typically occurs during a full moon, in any cavern where magical properties are abundant. Such caverns exist in scarcity worldwide, and were formed by fairies as safe havens during the Iparctic War some 3000 years ago. Most mermaids are created when an unwitting human happens upon such a cavern during a full moon and is transformed. The natural power of the full moon combined with the fairy magic residue in moon caves creates an intense pulse of magic, which influences the genetic structure of humans.

The second way for a mermaid to be created is natural birth. Although once very frequent, mermaid births are now extremely rare, owing to the paucity of breeding colonies. Mermaid children are born in mermaid form, and experience accelerated skills from an early age. It is believed that no mermaid children have been born in over 100 years."

Cleo laughed at this. "Yeah right!" she said gleefully, she herself knowing 11 mermaid children. She read on:

"Magical Powers: Like all other fantastical creatures, mermaids possess strong magic, the use of which enables the mermaid to influence nature. Mermaids possess the ability to command water, and occasionally other elements. Individual mermaids possess various different powers, and these individuals have different abilities regarding the control of water. Such powers include, but are not limited to:

The ability to shape water and influence wind currents

The ability to freeze water and create snow

The ability to boil water and create fire

The ability to mould and crystallize water

The ability to suspend animation in water

The ability to rearrange infrared spectrum of water (colour change)

The ability to influence the opacity of water (make cloudy or murky)

The ability to influence the density of water (make syrupy or thick)"

_Here Cleo shut the book quickly. She exhaled deeply, amazed at all the new information. She would read more later, once her heart had restarted. There were mermaids who could change the _colour_ of water? Cleo shook her head in awe. _

****N.B. Maeleachlainn is pronounced Mah-LOCK-len****

16. Episode Three, Luck o the Irish: Part V

Outside of Gibblockstown, Ireland, just after 5pm

Anna and Bella walked along the stony road. Their cab drove off in the opposite direction, leaving them alone in the middle of nowhere. Anna gulped, realizing that they were stranded. Around them were fields and fields of green grass filled with cows. There wasn't a house in sight.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Anna asked anxiously.

"Positive," Bella said, scanning the countryside. Her eyes stopped on a tiny shed out in the middle of a paddock. "There it is!"

_Anna squinted at the shack and frowned. _

Bella knocked on the steel door of the little shed.

"Who is it?" questioned a heavy Irish accent from inside.

"It's Bella," she called, "Will you let us in please?"

"Oh my word!" exclaimed the voice, "You're here, you're here! Fionnuala put the kettle on!"

The door opened to reveal a very small man of about 30 with astonishingly red hair and a charming smile. "My dear girl!" he exclaimed, "How are you?"

"Lucky!" Bella exclaimed happily, and bent down to hug the gentleman, who only reached her waist.

"I'd like you to meet my friend Anna," Bella said warmly, gesturing to Anna, whose wide eyes and gaping mouth rendered her appearance something akin to a codfish.

"Anna!" Bella nudged her sharply in the ribs.

"Oh sorry!" Anna said, coming back to reality, "It's so nice to meet you, Misterâ€¦ Erâ€¦"

"O'Flaherty. Maeleachlainn O'Flaherty," the man said, sticking out his hand to shake Anna's, "But please, call me Lucky."

"I do beg your pardon for asking," Anna began politely, "But are you aâ€¦"

"Leprechaun?" Maeleachlainn smiled warmly, "Yes, I am. And are you, dear girl, a mermaid?"

Anna nodded sheepishly. Just then her stomach growled again.

"Well let's not just stand here letting our wee tummies rumble, come in, come in!"

Anna and Bella followed Lucky into the shed (Bella confidently and Anna cautiously). He suddenly disappeared.

"Wow, did he just disappear or something?" Anna exclaimed.

_ "Um, Anna, he just went down the stairs," Bella said, one eyebrow raised._

_ Anna looked down at her feet and realized they were standing at the top of a long, sweeping spiral staircase. A red head bobbed down the stairwell._

_ "Oh," Anna said awkwardly, "I knew that."_

_ With a shrug, she began her descent down the long flight of stairs. A bright golden light flooded the stairwell from below, and Anna was anxious to know its source._

_ Bella laughed at her. "You read way too much Harry Potter," she grinned at Anna._

_ "Oh, shut up," Anna wrinkled her nose at Bella._

_ "Did he disappearate?" Bella mocked her, "Or did he leave to play Quidditch?"_

_ As the reached the bottom of the stairwell, they could hear a loud female voice coming from what they assumed to be the kitchen._

_ "Well, I certainly do hope they eat a lot," the voice said to Lucky, "Because I've made a whole roast dinner on top of this lot. If they're silly little girls who eat like pigeons, I'll be kickin' them out before you can say Gibblockstown."_

_ "Hush, they'll hear you," Lucky said. A few seconds later, he came out of the kitchen, flustered but smiling. _

_ "Ah, girls," he said jovially, "Welcome to my humble abode. Please make yourselves at home, dinner will be served imminently." Lucky bowed with a flourish and then returned to the kitchen._

_ Bella and Anna sat down in the comfy bright green armchairs of Lucky's gold and green living room. _

_ "Wow, so he's aâ€¦!"_

_ "Yep!"_

_ "And you knew him whenâ€¦!"_

_ "Yep!"_

_ "And were you in love with him?"_

_ Bella shot her a look. "What kind of a question is that?"_

_ "Well, were you?"_

_ "I had a _slight_ crush on him," Bella admitted._

_ "I knew it!" Anna smiled cheekily. "The mermaid and the leprechaun!" she pondered gleefully, "Oh what a couple you'd have made."_

_ "Hush," Bella said hurriedly, "That was a long time ago, I was young, he was my best friend and he was one of the few people that knew about my secret. And I'm married to Will now! So don't get any ideas." _

_ Anna hid her smile unsuccessfully. She snickered quietly. Bella shot her a look. _

_ A small girl with fiery red hair in curls down to her waist came in from the kitchen. _

_ "A hundred thousand welcomes to you," she said pleasantly, "I'm Lucky's little sister, Fionnuala, but please call me Fionn. And you must be Bella and Anna. Bella I've heard so much about you. Goodness me, Anna, your hair is as red as mine!" _

_ Anna embarrassedly tucked her straight ginger hair, which was currently chopped to her chin in a becoming bob, behind her ears. _

_ "It's wonderful to finally meet you!" gushed Bella, "Lucky always told me so much about you." _

_ "Well, dinner is served, and I hope you've both got appetites!" Fionn said cheerfully but with a hint of a challenge. _

_ Anna's stomach grumbled again in reply. _

_ They walked through to the dining room, which housed a long sleek wooden dining table and twelve more of the bright green armchairs. The walls, as in the living room, were gold, which made Anna frown thoughtfully. They weren't _actual _gold, were they? _

_ Lucky snapped his fingers, and presently eight armchairs disappeared, and the table shrunk down to be the perfect size for four. _

_ Anna gawked. She nudged Bella and said, "Did those go to play Quidditch too, huh?" _

_ oOoOoOoOo _

_ After they had finished Fionn's delicious dinner, Lucky showed the girls their rooms, and then the four sat down in the main living room. _

_ "Are the walls real gold?" Anna blurted out. _

_ Fionn smiled, "You shouldn't believe everything you read about leprechauns." _

_ "Oh," Anna said, subdued. _

_ "But yes, they are real gold," finished Fionn. _

_ Anna blinked. _

_ "Would you like to see the vault?" Fionn asked. _

_ "Wow, that would beâ€¦!" Anna nodded, "Yes please!" _

"So what brings you back to Ireland?" Lucky asked Bella when Anna and Fionnuala had left, "I know that you're worried about something. Spill."

"Well," she began, "You know how you gave me a copy of your book *Beasts of the Ages*?"

"I remember well," Lucky said.

"And in your inscription you wrote that if ever I realized I had lost something of myself, I should return to that which made me who I am," Bella continued, "Well, I realize that I've settled. I've accepted a life of normality and routine and monotony. I've lost my ability to act on my convictions, to change the world."

"Oh?" Lucky queried anxiously.

"It's not that I don't love Will and the kids, or all of my friends, or the life I'm living. It's just that sometimes it's all too samey."

"Bella Hartley got married? Well I never!" Lucky exclaimed.

"Oh," Bella said, blushing, "Did I not tell you that?"

_"No," Lucky said slowly, grinning slyly at Bella's embarrassment.
_

"Anyway," she moved on swiftly, anxious to put the awkward moment behind her, "I don't want to leave my life or anything drastic like that. I just want to have—I don't know..."

"An adventure?" Lucky finished for her.

"Yeah," Bella said with conviction, "Something dangerous and exciting and liberating and worthwhile. Will you help me? I didn't know who else to ask."

"Of course I'll help you!" Lucky said, "What are friends for?"

Bella smiled.

"Anna and Fionnuala came back into the room; Anna's eyes wide open. "So you guys seriously take gold from the ends of rainbows? That's like your job?"

"Fionnuala!" Lucky exclaimed, scolding her.

"What?" Fionn said innocently.

"Lucky looked at her sternly.

"I couldn't help it," she said, sticking her bottom lip out, "She's so gullible!"

The next morning, Anna coaxed Fionn into taking her shopping in Dublin. The two woke up early and used the preferred leprechaun method of transportation, unicycle, to get to town. Fionn had put her red hair in pigtails and dressed in a childish green gingham apron. It was decided that this way she would be thought of as Anna's child rather than the three-foot 8-inch high leprechaun she was.

Once they had left, Lucky took Bella into the study and opened a huge dusty tome on the desk. It had a picture of a raging red dragon on the front. She was feasting on fields of livestock and her huge claws dripped with blood.

Bella flinched at the sight of her.

"For twelve years now this county has been ravaged by the bloodthirsty dragon Voltaire. Few humans know of her existence, but she has destroyed the livelihoods of many. She feasts on livestock and occasionally humans, and destroys almost everything in her path."

"You want me to slay her?" Bella asked timidly.

"Ehrmâ€¦|" Said Lucky, "Effectively? No. We need to be rid of her, but the magical code of conduct states that we cannot slay her. We must banish her."

"Banish her?" Bella said uncertainly, "Won't she just cause trouble elsewhere?"

"Not where we're sending her." Lucky grinned.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Anna and Fionn walked through Dublin, each laden with three bags worth of clothes. Fionn stopped in front of the library and frowned pensively.

"What is it?" asked Anna curiously.

"I wonderâ€¦|" Fionn said mysteriously.

She walked up the stone steps and through the huge doors. Anna followed her inquisitively, accidentally tripping over one of the steps on the way in. She looked around, hoping no one had noticed her clumsiness.

Anna looked around, realizing she had lost track of Fionnuala. Then she noticed a very small redheaded child up ahead and hurried after her.

Fionn arrived in a huge room and stopped.

She made her way over to the far side of it, looked around her to make sure no-one was watching and tapped thrice on a large book. The bookshelf opened to reveal a long passage.

"Quickly," said Fionn to Anna.

Anna hurried after Fionn and watched as the bookshelf slid shut behind them.

Fionnuala turned left into a small room, which was almost entirely filled with an enormous book.

Anna watched as Fionnuala opened the book to a blank page.

"Write your name at the top," Fionn instructed Anna, handing her a feather quill.

_Anna did as she was told, and quickly scripted _Anna Charles (nee Mathews) _at the top of the page. _

Suddenly, the page began filling with a large family tree and records of genealogy. Anna gasped.

Fionn exclaimed jubilantly. "I thought so!" she cried, pointing at a part of the tree.

_Anna followed her finger and saw the name Declan Matthews about 6 generations up from her own name. She touched the name, and a new page of information began appearing. _

"My great-great-great-great grandfather was a leprechaun?" Anna exclaimed.

"He sure was!" Fionn replied, "I knew there was something distinctlyâ€¦ chaun-ish about you."

Anna marveled. "This explains so much! Why I've always been short, redheaded and freckly. Why everyone teased me for being a leprechaun at school! I'm one sixty-fourth leprechaun!"

oOoOoOoOo

Voltaire was vast. The length of a school bus and infinitely wider, she lay sleeping with her wings folded into her sides and her head curled to her belly.

"Oh my!" Bella exclaimed upon seeing her.

_"I know," Lucky said, "She's gorgeous. Terrible, awful, vicious and cruel. But a beauty none the less." _

Voltaire's iridescent red scales gleamed in the midday sun. She had a row of golden spikes atop her head, perched like a lethal crown on a sleeping princess. Her tail waved gently as she slept, sweeping the cliff where she was perched.

"Now, remember what we went over," Lucky said hurriedly, "Powers, powers, powers. And worst comes to worst, I want you to leave, Bella. I can look after myself."

"Alright," Bella said.

_Bella inhaled sharply as Voltaire's eye opened slightly. It was a piercing green, alert and menacing. _

Voltaire must have seen them, because she suddenly stretched her wings up to the sky and roared.

"Y'ready?" asked Lucky with a sly grin.

Bella nodded.

As the dragon swooped towards them threateningly, Bella curled her fingers in inconspicuously, exploding the fluids in Voltaire's abdomen. As she did so, Voltaire shrieked and emitted a streak of flame. This narrowly missed Bella, and she ran to the side to escape further fire.

"Now!" Lucky exclaimed.

_Suddenly, a dazzling rainbow appeared in the sky as Lucky used his powers. Voltaire, dumbstruck, was slowly lifted up through the colours and into the sky. Bella manipulated her hand to mould a temporary hole in the ozone, just large enough for Voltaire to pass through. _

Suddenly, just before she reached the atmosphere, Voltaire broke free of the rainbow's hold and swooped, screaming, down to Bella. She flamed, catching Bella's sleeve on fire, and then thrashed violently with her tail. Bella fell from the cliff and onto a stony ledge.

At this precise moment, Lucky strengthened his power and lifted Voltaire quickly up the rainbow and expelled her from the Earth's atmosphere. The hole in the ozone sealed behind her, trapping the dragon in space for all eternity.

Lucky breathed a sigh of relief. Suddenly, he realized Bella wasn't with him. He ran down the cliff and stooped at her side. She was unconscious, bleeding and not breathing. Lucky gasped.

___oOoOoOoOo___

_Emma woke with a start in the middle of the night. She looked over at Ash, who was sound asleep next to her, and quietly rolled out of bed. _

_She tiptoed silently into the nursery to check on Lucy and Arianna. Both were sleeping like angels. She went along the corridor to Eric's room. He too was fine. _

Emma frowned, wondering what had woken her. She felt a sudden pang again, as though someone were in pain.

_Emma slipped on her favourite cream coat and unlocked the front door. She crept quietly into Cleo's house and tapped her gently on the shoulder. _

"Whah?" Cleo murmured groggily, "No, Lewis, I don't want to watch discovery channel."

"Cleo," Emma whispered, "It's me."

_Cleo opened one eye drowsily. "Emma!" she said loudly. _

"Shhh," Emma said, "You'll wake Lewis."

_ "He's a heavy sleeper," Cleo moaned, rolling out of bed, "What are you doing here, Em?" _

_ Emma didn't respond, but dragged Cleo with her to Rikki's house, where she pulled Rikki out of bed. _

_ The three girls sat down in the living room. _

_ "What's up, Em?" Rikki asked confusedly. _

_ "Something's happened," Emma said anxiously, "I know it has. Bella and Anna are in trouble." _

_ "Are you sure?" Cleo asked in a panic. _

_ The phone rang. Rikki stood up to answer it. Her face turned white as she listened. "Alright," she said, and put the phone down. _

_ Turning to Cleo and Emma, Rikki was pale as a sheet. "That was Anna. She thinks we should come." _

18. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part I

_ Cleo, Rikki and Emma swam as fast as they could to the mainland, dressed quickly and took a taxi to the airport. _

_ They arrived just after seven in the morning, and already the sun was beating down brilliantly in the sky. _

_ Cleo, Emma and Rikki rushed up to the counter in the international terminal. _

_ "Dublin please," Cleo said anxiously, "Three tickets on the first flight you can get." _

_ The happy-go-lucky clerk smiled at them. "Just a minute please." She clacked slowly on the keyboard, taking what seemed like an age. _

_ Rikki tapped her fingers impatiently on the counter. _

_ Emma elbowed her in the ribs. "Be polite," she muttered. _

_ The clerk finally looked up at them and smiled. "There's a flight to Singapore leaving in half an hour, and I can check you through to Dublin from there. I'll have to rush you through security, but I can do it." _

_ "That's perfect!" Rikki exclaimed edgily, "Hurry, hurry!" _

_ Emma raised her eyebrows. _

_ After a hurried security check and a dash to the gate, Rikki, Cleo and Emma made it onto the plane and sat in their seats. Due to the last-minute arrangements, the three girls were spread out through the plane, with Emma in 32C, Cleo in 46J and Rikki in 55E. _

_ None of the girls slept on the 8-hour flight to Singapore, nor did

they watch any in-flight movies. They were too panicked._

oOoOoOoOo

Upon arrival at Singapore airport, the girls quickly ran through the terminal to switch planes. They boarded the flight to Dublin just in time, and as they went to sit down, the plane began to pull away from the gate.

This flight the three girls were all seated together, Emma by the window, Rikki at the aisle and Cleo in the middle.

_The flight was much like the one before it. The girls were scared, and didn't sleep or eat for the whole journey. _

_Emma gazed anxiously out the window into the night sky. The atmosphere was clear and starry, and she was calmed by the serenity of it. Emma blinked quickly as she saw a strange shape in the sky. It looked unusually like a bright red dragon rearing its head. Emma shook her head, attributing the hallucination to a lack of sleep.

-

Rikki clutched her growing belly tenderly, worrying about everything in life that scared her. She worried about the pregnancy, and the complications that had already occurred with it. She worried about Leila and Charlie, who she knew she wasn't a good enough mother to. But most of all she worried about Bella, the thought to whom frightened her to her very core. She knew that it must be awful if Anna found it necessary to send for them.

_Cleo, in the middle of them, read _Beasts of the Ages_ anxiously, too distracted with worry to truly pay attention to what she was reading. She was tired and hungry, but too anxious to sleep or eat; bored, but too worried to amuse herself. She flicked absentmindedly through the book's pages, barely glancing at any of the information._

__oOoOoOoOo__

_When the plane finally landed in Dublin many hours later, all three girls were fast asleep. They drifted off in the middle of the night, exhausted and anxious. _

_As the wheels thudded onto the tarmac, Cleo awoke with a start. She yawned lazily, looked about her confusedly and then recalled everything that had happened in the past 24 hours. _

"Emma, Rikki," she hissed, "We're here! Wake up."

The two girls squinted at Cleo, then sat up with a start. The plane was pulling into the gate.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Anna and Fionnuala stood at the arrivals gate, looking anxiously through the crowd for any sign of Cleo, Emma or Rikki.

_Neither had slept, and Anna was ashen-faced from worry. She paced nervously back and forth. She'd been feeling ill for a few days now,

and had been throwing up. She'd brushed it off as anxiety and concern for Bella's recovery, but she was beginning to wonder ifâ€¦|_

_"Anna!" a familiar voice called. _

_Turning around quickly, she saw Emma wave and her. Cleo and Rikki were not too far behind. _

_Emma ran to Anna and hugged her. _

_"Thank goodness you're here," Anna said worriedly. _

"Is she okay?" Emma asked concernedly.

_"Um," Anna began cautiously, but was cut off by Rikki and Cleo hugging her tightly. _

"We should probably get going," Fionnuala said fretfully.

Rikki, Emma and Cleo looked at the small redhead with an expression of confusion.

"Oh, sorry!" Anna said hurriedly, "Cleo, Rikki, Em, this is Fionnuala. Bella and I are staying with her and her brother."

"Nice to meet you," Cleo said, half-smiling at Fionn, but too weary to be cheerful.

_The four mermaids and the leprechaun hurried out to where a taxi was waiting. _

"Gibblockstown please," Fionn instructed the driver. They sped off towards Gibblockstown, and towards Bella.

__oOoOoOoOo__

"Bella!" Rikki, Cleo and Emma cried simultaneously as they entered her room at Lucky's house.

_Bella was on the bed, lying limply on her back. There were deep purple bruises all down her arms and a large weeping gash on her forehead. She was pale and bloodstained, but fast asleep and breathing quite easily. _

_A red haired boy who looked a lot like Fionnuala was keeping vigil at her bedside. Hearing them, he looked up sadly. _

"Hi," he said, "You must be Emma, Cleo and Rikki. I'm so glad you're here."

"Is she going to be okay?" Emma asked anxiously, looking utterly heartbroken.

_"She'll pull through," the man said, "Mermaids have much better stamina for recovery than humans. But it'll take a while for her to get back to normal, and at the moment, extreme damage to her spinal cord means she has no use of her legs. That will pass eventually-it's not broken, just badly bruised and inflamed, but she won't walk

for weeks, possibly months."_

"Oh Bella," the girls wept. Anna hugged them warmly- she was over the initial shock and had become a very efficient caregiver to the invalid.

With all the noise, Bella had woken up, and smiled at Rikki, Emma and Cleo. "Hey guys!" she rasped weakly, "I'm so glad you're here."

They clasped her hands and hugged and kissed her, relieved that she was awake and alright.

"Hey, Fionn, would you get me a glass of water?" Bella asked hoarsely.

Fionnuala gladly obliged, and slipped quietly out to the kitchen.

"Dear Bella, what on earth happened?" Rikki asked worriedly.

"Well," Bella said, uncertain what to say.

"Wait till you're better, Bella," the red-haired man said sweetly, "It'll be easier then."

"Of course!" Rikki said, "I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

_"Go back to sleep," Cleo said gently, "We'll talk to you soon." She squeezed Bella's hand and motioned to Emma, Anna and Rikki to come out with her. _

As they left, Bella looked gratefully and hopefully at Lucky. "Do you think you could tell what them happened for me?"

19. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part II

_"Please, sit, sit," Lucky said, ushering the four girls into the living room. _

Rikki, six and a half months pregnant, collapsed onto a lime-coloured chaise lounge, her large belly sticking up comically in the air.

_Curling up in a bright green armchair, Cleo looked pensively at Lucky. _

"Are you May-uh-lee-uh-klayn?" she asked.

He laughed. "It's Mah-lock-len," he said, smiling, "But do please call me Lucky."

_"So you wrote _Beast of the Ages?_" Cleo asked excitedly._

"I did!" Lucky exclaimed, happy that someone was familiar with his work, "You've read it?"

"I haven't gotten that far into it yet, but I've read most of what you wrote about mermaids. It's amazing!" Cleo exclaimed, "I'm learning so much."

"Glad to be of assistance," Lucky grinned.

"Are you a leprechaun?" Rikki asked.

"Anna answered on Lucky's behalf, "He is. So is Fionnuala. And so am I!"

"What!" Cleo, Emma and Rikki exclaimed simultaneously.

"Well, I'm one sixty-fourth leprechaun," Anna explained.

"Huh," Rikki said, "I always thought you had an elfin look about you."

_"Anna smiled self-consciously. _

"So, Lucky," Emma said politely, "Do you think you would tell us what happened to Bella?"

"She asked me to," he replied, "So I will."

_"Lucky explained everything, from Anna and Bella's arrival in Gibblockstown to their encounter with Voltaire to Fionnuala's expert leprechaun nursing of Bella. _

_"I know this is mostly my fault, and I am incredibly sorry, but I couldn't bear to see Bella so restless, soâ€| trapped. I wanted to give her an adventure," Lucky said ashamedly. _

"Emma and Anna were both weeping silently as they listened to Lucky's heartfelt justification. Although Anna had heard it twice before, it still touched her heart how fiercely loyal a friend Lucky was, and Emma, such a romantic at heart, was endeared to Lucky by his kindness and devotion to Bella. She sniffed softly and wiped at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"You've been a true friend to Bella where we haven't been," Cleo said gratefully, "We didn't realize she felt so trapped. We didn't even notice anything was wrong."

"Justâ€| if I may," Lucky began.

"Yes, of course," they encouraged him.

"Make sure that she has adventure. Maybe not as drastic and dangerous as my solution, but something more than being a wife and mother. She's got spark, Bella does, and I don't want to see her cooped up in a life without excitement."

"We will," the girls nodded. It was a much-needed wake-up call for all of them as they too realized the necessity of purpose and adventure in their own lives.

oOoOoOoOoOo

9th May 2019

The girls were returned home safely from Ireland, and Bella had been resting and recovering in bed since they arrived back on Mako a few days earlier. They'd flown, since Bella was in no state to swim home. Will had been so anxious that he'd taken a flight to meet them in Singapore on their way home and flew back to the Gold Coast with Bella in his arms.

_Bella had cried profusely on their return home and vowed never to leave Will or the kids again. _

"I can't believe I was so selfish!" she had wept, "I was just so restless and I wanted an adventure."

"It's completely understandable!" Will had reassured her, kneeling beside her wheelchair and stroking her hair affectionately.

"But as I was lying there, after Voltaire got me, I realized something," she had sniffed quietly.

"What's that?" Will had asked sweetly.

"You and Jacob and Danielle have been the best adventure of my life. I don't want anything more than you, and I don't ever want to stop counting my blessings. I love you three more than any quest in the world, and I was so silly to not see that before."

They had kissed adoringly before Bella fell asleep, weak and weary from her adventures.

__oOoOoOoOo__

Today was Will's birthday, and Bella was keen to surprise him. As he slept, she wheeled herself down to the ocean and spent the early hours of the morning crafting for him a beautiful water sculpture.

_When he awoke, a note on his bedside table instructed him to "Meet me at the beach. I love you." Bella had signed it with a kiss. Will rolled out of bed and dressed quickly. _

_He ran down the path to the water's edge and found Bella smiling sweetly. Beside her was a beautifully crafted sculpture of the two of them kissing, standing underneath a waterfall. Bella had scripted "I love you" in water across the base of the sculpture and adorned it with flowers from Mako's forests. _

"Bella!" Will exclaimed.

She smiled sweetly and opened her arms. Will ran over and picked her up out of the wheelchair and swung her around in his arms. They kissed and lay down in the sand. They cloud-watched and talked for the rest of the morning, sweet and happy together.

__oOoOoOoOo__

"Ben?" Anna called, "Wanna go for a swim?"

They both had the day off, and Anna was eager to go swimming.

The two walked down to the moon pool hand in hand. As they transformed, Ben smiled at his beautiful wife, glad that she was home safely. He had missed her. The two swam out to another island not too far from Mako to a secluded inlet. This island was completely uninhabited and isolated in the middle of the ocean. Anna and Ben swam onto the golden beach.

"Wow," Anna said, "You've gotten fast!"

Ben smiled at the compliment. "I really want to beat Emma in the next competition we have. I can't keep being beaten by a girl," he explained.

Anna laughed at him. "You're so sweet," she said, laughing at his competitive nature.

They sat on the beach in the warm sun.

"Hey Ben," Anna said quietly, "We're going to have another baby. I found out while we were in Ireland."

He looked over at her, surprised. "Truly? That's wonderful, sweetie!"

_"I hoped you'd think so. I have a feeling that this one's a girl," Anna confided in him. As much as she loved her two little boys, she'd dreamed since childhood of having a little girl to dress up and do ballet with. _

"I'm so happy," Ben smiled at her, "Want to explore?"

"Let's go!" she grinned back.

Hand in hand, Anna and Ben ran along the pathway in the forest and over the hills of this new island.

_Suddenly, in front of them, a brilliant flash of red caught their eyes. _

"Oh my gosh," Anna gasped.

"Is that a phoenix?" Ben breathed.

At the top of the hill, the most beautiful luminous red bird was spreading its wings. It was brighter than the sun itself, and appeared to be on fire. It had golden plumes sprouting from its head and radiant crimson tail feathers extending majestically all around where it perched.

"It's not, is it?" Anna asked Ben cautiously.

"I think so!" he replied, marveling at the phoenix's beauty.

_"We've got to tell the others!" Anna exclaimed, and began to run back towards the shore. As she did this, the beautiful bird raised its wings to the sky and sang out. Its voice was like a beautiful chorus of bells, high and pealing, loud and gorgeous. _

Anna turned back at this sound, and saw the enormous red bird swooping towards her. She ducked as it flew incredibly close to her head and watched it soar out over the ocean. It left in its wake a trail of fine golden dust, shimmering in the sunlight. Anna caught a handful of this and pocketed it.

Ben ran to catch up with her and followed her gaze to where the phoenix now flew over the serene blue sea.

"Wow," they said in unison.

20. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part III

The next day- 10th May

"Well, here goes!" Rikki said to herself.

_Rikki took one last look at the brilliant golden vial in front of her before gulping down its contents. _

_Just as she did this, Zane walked into the bedroom with a quizzical expression on his face. _

Rikki looked up at him guiltily. "What?" she said innocently.

"Rikki," Zane said sternly, "What was in the vial?"

"Wellâ€¦" she said slowly, "You know Lucky?"

"Bella's friend? Sure."

He's a leprechaun, right, and so they have magical powers, and I told Lucky about my issues with the babies, and so he made up this potion for me to make me feel better and that's all I was doing and it's fine so don't look at me like that Zane Bennett!" Rikki blurted out all in one breath.

"Honey, it's fine! If it's going to make you feel better than it's all good by me. Don't feel you have to hide it from me," he said smiling.

_"Oh," Rikki said, a little bit disappointed that she hadn't gotten in trouble. _

"Why don't you lay down for a bit?" Zane asked gently, "I'm gonna take the twins to the beach."

"Okay," Rikki said gratefully, and lay back on the plush pillows.

After he left, Rikki suddenly felt immensely energized, incredibly happy and no longer weak, tired or nauseous. She sat up abruptly, with a huge grin on her face.

_She got up with a bounce in her step and ran around the house three times, her belly jiggling as she did so. Moving unnaturally quickly, Rikki dashed about doing all the things she'd had no energy for in the past 6 months. Rikki vacuumed the house, did the dishes, made

dinner, mowed the lawn and cleaned everything in the house in the space of twenty minutes. _

Left without anything more to do in her own house, she snuck into Bella's house and vacuumed, cleaned and cooked in there. When she finished she repeated the process in Anna's and Cleo's houses. She moved on to Emma's house, which much to her chagrin was already immaculate, but she cleaned it from top to bottom anyway.

With no cleaning or cooking left to do, Rikki ran down to the moon pool with more energy than ever before and swam as fast as she could back to the mainland.

She dashed into Rikki's Caf   and grinned manically at Olivia who was serving juices behind the counter.

"Rikki?" Olivia asked, "What are you doing here? I thought you were on bed rest."

"Oh, Livvy, Livvy, Livvy," Rikki cheered excitedly, "There's no time to be in bed, when there's so much to do and so much energy to be spent. Live life to the fullest and stop worrying about everything."

_Olivia blinked at her employer. She'd never seen Rikki in a state like this in the all the years she'd known her. _

"Um, Rikki, are you okay?" Olivia asked anxiously.

"Am I okay?" Rikki laughed, "Why I've never been better in my whole entire life! But I cannot stay, I must away! Hey that rhymed! Well, Olivia, I wish you all the luck of the Irish."

And with a sprightly little jig Rikki ran out of the caf  .

Olivia frowned at what she'd just seen. She picked up the caf   phone and called Zane's mobile.

"Hey Zane, it's Olivia!"

"Hey, what's up, everything okay at the caf  ?"

"Um, yeah, but Rikki was just here  !"

"Rikki? Really? But she's at home fast asleep."

"Um, I'd say she's about as far from sleep as you can get. She's unnaturally energized."

"I'll be right there."

oOoOoOoOo

Zane finally found Rikki after an hour or two of searching. She was at the marine park, cleaning everything she could. When Zane got to her, she was precariously balanced on a pole reaching out to clean a sign pointing towards the dolphins.

_"ZANEY!" Rikki called out ecstatically, and jumped down from the

pole. "My dearest darling, how _are _you?" Rikki asked earnestly, gazing up at him with a crazed look in her eye._

"Rikki," Zane said calmly, "I need you to come home now."

"Oh nooo!" she wailed, "There's so much left to do!"

"I know sweetie, butâ€¦" seeing that he wasn't going to achieve anything with logical reasoning, Zane instead made up a little white lie, "but Charlie spilled some jam on the carpet and the house isn't clean!"

"Rikki eyes widened in horror. "But! But!"

"She ran as fast as she could to the shore and swam back to Mako. By the time Zane got there Rikki was already scrubbing the carpet furiously, oblivious to the fact that there was no jam on it.

"Rikki, honey, come with me," Zane instructed her calmly. This wasn't like her being moonstruck, as she did still seem to retain a sort of sanity, but the newfound energy and enthusiasm for cleaning was more than Zane could bear. He ushered her into the bedroom and locked the door behind her.

"I'm sorry sweetie," he called through the door, "But it's for your own good."

"There was no reply, but Zane could faintly hear Rikki's frantic scrubbing on the floor. He blinked, stupefied by this new side of his wife.

"Bella!" he called, running towards the Benjamins' house.

"She wheeled out through the hallway and answered the door. "Hey Zane, what's up?"

"Do you have that leprechaun man's phone number?" he panted.

"Lucky? Sure just a minute." Bella turned in her wheelchair and rode down the hallway. Zane followed her agitatedly.

_"Bella gave Zane a green piece of paper with Lucky's number written on it. _

"Can I use your phone?" he asked.

"Sure," Bella smiled, then returned to the nursery to check on Danielle.

"Zane dialed quickly and waited it rang.

"Hello?" an Irish accent answered.

"Hi, Lucky? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO MY WIFE?" Zane screeched.

"Who may I ask is calling?" Lucky retorted politely.

_"Oh. Sorry," Zane calmed, "This is Zane Bennett, you met my wife

Rikki about a week ago when she came to bring Bella home."_

"Ah, yes, Rikki!"

"Well, anyway, whatever magical leprechaun potion you gave her has made her go berserk."

"Oh, I've actually been meaning to call you about that!" Lucky said, "Turns out it's much too strong a dose for her species."

"YA THINK?" Zane asked loudly.

"I assume she's taken it then," Lucky laughed, "All right, here's what you need to do."

___oOoOoOoOo___

"Rikki, honey?" Zane called, "I'm coming in."

"As he opened the door, Rikki flung herself into his arms and kissed him passionately. "I'm so glad you're back," she said excitedly, "I've missed you!"

"Zane stared at her. "Anyway!" he said, "I made you a snack."

"She looked at him appreciatively. "For me! You're too sweet." She kissed him again and then quickly gobbled the plate of whiskey-coated clover pieces.

_"Suddenly, Rikki blinked, much subdued. She sat down on the bed, exhausted and stunned. _

"Who cleaned?" she asked incredulously.

21. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part IV

"May 24th 2019"

"Well, congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Charles, it's anâ€¦ it!"

_"Anna and Ben sat in Lewis' office as he looked at the results of the ultrasound. Ben grinned happily at Anna, who was perched on the bed with her short red hair in pigtails. _

"By the looks of it, you're about 12 weeks along," Lewis continued, "And little baby here is looking very happy and healthy."

"Anna and Ben breathed a joint sigh of relief.

"Do you want to see the sonogram?" Lewis asked them.

"Ben went over and stood by Lewis and Anna hopped off the bed to join them.

"Ohhhh!" Anna exclaimed, "Is that it?"

"Yup," Lewis said, "There's your baby. I'll give you two a minute alone."

He left his office and closed the door behind himself.

Anna and Ben stared lovingly at the monitor for a few minutes. Then Ben nudged Anna gently.

"Honey!" he whispered sadly, "I don't see it."

"What? You mean you can't see our baby?" Anna asked indignantly.

"No!" Ben said dejectedly.

"Neither can I!" Anna wailed, "I lost track of it when Lewis left the room. Where is it?"

Ben was searching the monitor earnestly for any signs of life.

"Honey, we need to find the baby!" Anna said tragically.

They brought Lewis back in and he gladly pointed out the little dot on the monitor for them. Anna and Ben smiled with relief.

oOoOoOoOoOo

"Mamma, why is Auntie Bella in a wheelchair?" Jenny asked curiously.

Cleo had swum with her kids over to Phoenix Island (appropriately named so by Anna and Ben earlier that month), and they were now exploring the lush landscape of the island. Max clutched his mother's hand firmly, but determined little Jenny skipped ahead, enjoying herself immensely.

_Cleo hesitated at Jenny's query. She wasn't too sure she wanted her to know that a dragon had attacked Auntie Bella. _

"She had an accident when she and Auntie Anna went to Ireland. She fell on some rocks and hurt herself," Cleo said almost truthfully, "But don't worry, she won't be in a wheelchair forever."

_Cleo looked at her watch. It was five o'clock, which meant that they should be heading home. _

"All right troops," Cleo said officially, "Homewards."

_All of a sudden, Jenny disappeared from in front of her and she heard her little shriek. Cleo screamed and ran to where he had been a second earlier. _

Cleo grasped Max hand tighter as she looked down the tunnel Jenny had tumbled into. A faint blue light was shining from the end of the tunnel.

_This was strangely reminiscent of the day she, Emma and Rikki first became mermaids, when she herself fell down the entrance to the moon pool. Jenny was becoming too much like her mother. Cleo rolled her eyes, realizing that she had to go down after her daughter, possibly with no chance of getting back up. _

Cleo picked up Max and clutched him tight to her chest, and slid down into the shimmery semi-darkness.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Arianna was crying. She'd been crying for the past hour. Emma had tried ****everything****. The 3-month was clean, dry, fed and bathed, but still she wailed.

_Emma was beginning to forget what anything else sounded like than the rhythmic screech of her baby's cry. Her eardrums were thudding from the noise. _

_"Shhhhhh," she hushed almost frantically. Emma began pacing frustratedly. She walked determinedly from the nursery to the kitchen, rocking Arianna gently back and forth. _

Suddenly she tripped over one of Eric's toys that was lying on the floor and fell forward with a sickening lurch. She felt the baby slip from her grasp, and her heart skipped a beat.

There was no sound. No wailing baby. But no smack on the ice floor either.

Emma dared not look. She swallowed nervously and opened her eye just a crack.

Arianna was levitating a few inches off the ground, hovering on a cushion of air and happily oblivious to the world.

_Emma blinked. _

oOoOoOoOoOo

_Cleo landed with a thud on the hard floor of the cave. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim, sparkling light. _

_She looked back up the shaft through which she'd just fallen, squinting at the small stream of sunlight that poured through it.

_

"Jenny?" Cleo called timidly.

Cleo stood up gingerly, rubbing her elbow where she bumped it on the way down, and let go of her grasp on Max, who smiled toothily at her.

"Jenny?" she called again, more frantically this time. There was no response, and Cleo's stomach dropped. She ran her fingers through her hair anxiously.

_Cleo emptied the contents of her backpack onto the ground and examined them. _

_Packed lunchesâ€| water bottlesâ€| cell phoneâ€| extra sweatersâ€| diapersâ€| first aid kitâ€| raincoats, sunscreenâ€| sunhatsâ€| reading bookâ€|. Flashlight! _

_Cleo jubilantly flicked the switch on the torch and the cave light

up brightly. _

She gasped as she took in her surroundings.

22. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part V

"Hey guys," Lewis said, walking into the main living area. Rikki and Bella were in the kitchen cooking dinner, Emma and Ash were talking quietly between themselves and Anna was happily sitting on Ben's lap. Zane and Will would be home from the mainland soon. It was almost 6 o'clock.

Anna looked up and smiled at Lewis. "Hiya. You have a good day?"

"It was fine. Have you seen Cleo and the kids? I don't know where they are?"

Emma looked up from her conversation with Ash. "She took them over to Phoenix Island earlier this afternoon. She did say they'd be back by five thirty." Emma looked at her watch. "That's odd. I wonder where she could be?"

Anna flicked open her bright pink cell phone. "I'll try calling her, but I don't think there's reception on Phoenix Island."

After a minute or so, Anna closed the phone and shook her head. "No," she said, "Her cell's out of range."

"Do you think we should go look for them?" Lewis asked concernedly.

Emma bit her lip and nodded. "I mean, they could be alright, but what if they're not?"

Anna added, "It's better that we look and it turns out they're fine than for them to be lying unconscious on a cliff somewhere with no rescue party!"

Lewis inhaled sharply.

_"Not that they are!" Anna added apologetically.

_

oOoOoOoOoOo

_Cleo wished she'd worn different shoes. Her flip-flops had no grip to them, and as she traversed precariously across the shining blue rocks, she slipped often. _

_She looked back towards the blanket. Her two children sat playing quietly. As it turned out, Jenny had been hiding from her in a corner, and had jumped out and shouted 'boo' a few seconds after she began looking for her. Cleo was incredibly relieved. _

Now Jenny was minding her brother as Cleo looked for a way out.

_The cave was incredible. Cleo was absolutely astounded by its

beauty. Everything around her appeared to be made of crystal, iridescent and blue. Though the cave was dark, it was illuminated by the glow of the large crystal rocks covering the cave floor and hanging from its ceiling. _

_It was long and narrow, and Cleo very much hoped that at the far end was an exit. She placed her feet carefully as she staggered from rock to rock. They were jagged and unstable, and Cleo's flip-flops shifted treacherously underfoot. _

_She at last reached the far end of the cave, and exhaled gratefully. There was a large pool of water, not unlike their own moon pool, which Cleo noticed had tidal rings on its edges. _

"Jenny, honey?" Cleo called back.

"Yes mamma?"

"I'll be back in just a minute. Stay put."

_Cleo stripped off her tank top and shorts and tossed them down by the waters' edge. She dove in and transformed a few seconds later. Cleo ducked under the water and looked around in the water. There was a small gap in the rock, just big enough for Cleo to swim through. She squeezed her eyes closed for a second, and then swam through the rock. _

She surfaced in the sunlight. She looked about herself ecstatically and put her hand to her forehead to squint into the sun. In the distance she could see the silhouette of Mako Island in front of the setting sun. Cleo breathed a sigh of relief and swam back into the cave.

_She rushed back towards Jenny and Max and kissed them both on the forehead. She instructed Jenny to hold Max's hand and help him across the rocks. _

_Cleo made sure that Jenny and Max were safely across before starting back over the rocks herself. _

She was almost to the far end when she lost her balance.

_She slipped on the unsteady edge of a large rock and grabbed for support. Cleo's hand landed on a blue crystal stalactite, which held her steady for a minute before shattering under her grip. Cleo tumbled from the rock, its jagged edge slicing her leg on the way down. _

Cleo winced at the pain, but stood up courageously. She hobbled to the pool. Max threw his arms around her anxiously.

"Are you okay mamma?" he asked nervously.

_Cleo felt light-headed. She looked down at her hand, which was throbbing painfully. As she had expected, a steady trickle of blood flowed from her palm where she had grabbed onto the stalactite. However, much to her surprise, Cleo noticed that her hand had begun to shine. It shimmered, and was glowing faintly white. She looked down at her leg and noticed that it too, was iridescent and glistening. Cleo blinked and shook her head, thinking that she must

be imagining it due to blood loss. _

_Cleo swooned slightly, but shook herself back into consciousness.
_

"Jenny," she said gently, "My brave girl. I want you to swim back to Mako Island and bring one of your aunties back to where I am, okay?"

_Jenny looked a bit scared, but nodded. She jumped into the pool and swam through the crack in the rock. _

Cleo sighed and lay down on the hard cave floor. Max toddled over and hugged Cleo's bleeding leg lovingly.

Cleo soon drifted off to sleep, blocking out all of the pain and submitting to her weariness.

23. Episode Four, Discoveries: Part VI

Evening, Phoenix Island. Still May 24th.

"Cleo?" a voice called from far away, "Cleo can you hear me?"

Cleo wondered why the voice sounded so worried. It sounded sort of like Emma. Or maybe Lewis. Or perhaps it was Audrey Hepburn. Cleo couldn't be bothered figuring it out. She rolled over and hugged the pillow tighter. The pillow squirmed away from her grasp. Cleo frowned, her eyes still closed. Pillows aren't supposed to squirm. She opened her eye just a crack, not really wanting to wake up.

Everything was blue. And sparkly. Cleo could see a pair of ankles in front of her. Maybe they were Audrey's. She closed her eyes again.

"Cleo?" the voice was louder this time. Suddenly a hand shook her shoulder. Cleo opened her eyes and looked up at Emma's anxious face.

"Hi Emma," Cleo murmured sleepily, "Why's it all blue?"

Emma smiled. "Thank goodness you're alright! You've lost quite a bit of blood."

_Regaining consciousness fully, Cleo sat up and looked about her. Slowly it all came back to her. The last thing she remembered was Jenny swimming out of the cave. _

Cleo was surrounded by quite a lot of blood. Her head hurt from dizziness. Max was sitting nearby, and Cleo realized that he must have been the pillow. Emma was standing over her, looking concerned.

_"Cleo, I think something very strange has happened," Emma said, frowning anxiously and looking Cleo over. _

_"I know!" Cleo nodded, "Jenny was just suddenly gone, so I came down

the tunnel after her and then everything was shining and blue and I fell on the rocks."_

Emma bit her lip. "Even stranger. Look," she said, gesturing to Cleo's leg.

Cleo blinked. Where she had cut herself on the rock, there was no longer any wound. There was a faint white scar where it had been gashed open, but the wound had completely healed over. More than that, her whole leg was shining and sparkling brightly, pale blue and iridescent and glittery. Cleo now noticed that her left leg matched the other in that it glistened brilliantly. Her whole body was sparkling. Cleo gasped.

Emma's lips were pursed and her eyes wide. She was stunned.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Lewis was typing steadily on his laptop, a peculiar frown fixed on his brow. Cleo sat on the bed with her legs folded under her. She was still sparkling.

Lewis' floppy golden hair was getting very long. Cleo hadn't cut it in a while, and it now fell over his face in messy tufts.

_Cleo looked at her watch. It was past ten. She yawned sleepily, exhausted from a hard day. _

Lewis was still typing. Cleo sucked in her cheeks.

"Lewis," she began hesitantly.

He glanced at her. "Yeah?"

"You don't honestly think you're going to find on the internet why your mermaid wife has turned blue and is sparkling, do you? At least, nothing that couldn't wait until morning?" Cleo said, with a rather hopeful tone in her voice.

_He frowned, then shut the laptop with a slight bang. _

"Okay," he said wearily, "Go home, go to bed, whatever."

_Cleo grinned at him and ruffled his unkempt hair. "I _do _appreciate it, you know," she said gratefully._

"Yeah, sure." Lewis rolled his eyes.

"Love ya!" Cleo called, already out the door.

oOoOoOoOoOo

_The phone was ringing. _

"Zaaaaaaaneâ€|. " Rikki yelled, "Will you get that?"

_There was no response. Leila and Charlie were in bed, and Rikki didn't want the phone to wake them. With a martyred expression, Rikki rolled her eyes and got up to run to the phone. _

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hi, is this Mrs. Rikki Bennett?" a polite female voice asked.

"Yes, this is she," Rikki answered, a tad confused. Not many people called.

"Hi, this is Polly from the Gold Coast Hospital. Your husband's father, Harrison Bennett, has suffered a heart attack and is at the hospital here. As his next of kin, we've been asked to inform you."

"Oh my gosh!" Rikki cried anxiously, "Is he okay?"

"He's not doing too great," Polly said solemnly, "You and your husband should probably come in."

_"Thanks for calling," Rikki said quietly, and hung up the phone. She was as white as a sheet. _

Rikki sunk down into a chair, clutching her large belly protectively. 'Harrison had a heart attack?' Rikki thought incredulously. She and her father-in-law had never had the smoothest of relationships, but in recent times they were getting along much better, and he was a good grandfather to Leila and Charlie.

_"Zaaane!" she called again, with a frantic intonation. Again there was no reply. _

_ Rikki blinked back tears and bit her lip. She inhaled deeply, closed her eyes and then leapt up. She quickly scrawled a note to Zane, and then ran as fast as her pregnant body could take her to the moon pool, dove in and swam to the mainland._

24. Episode Five, Love and Loss: Part I

"Hi, I'm Rikki Bennett, I'm here to see Harrison Bennett, he's my father in law," Rikki explained in one frantic breath.

The nurse behind the desk in the hospital looked tired. It was well past midnight. Her grey-blond hair was in a ponytail with loose bits around her face, and she had dark circles under her eyes.

"Just a moment please," she said tiredly but politely, and looked at a clipboard on the desk, "He's just down the hall, second door on your right."

"Thank you so much," Rikki said gratefully, and took off down the clinically white corridor.

She stood in front of that door for what felt like an eternity. After a moment, Rikki tasted blood and realized that she had been biting her lip. Her hands were trembling.

She pushed the door open.

oOoOoOoOo

Her father-in-law looked small and grey. Rikki recoiled slightly at how much he had aged. She was so used to being surrounded by people whose appearances never changed that she was quite stunned by her father-in-law's grey hair and wrinkles.

Rikki crept quietly into the room and sat at the foot of the pristine hospital bed and carefully examined her surroundings. Harrison was fast asleep, his breathing shallow but even. Multiple wires leading to various machines were spread across his bed. A heart rate monitor beeped intermittently, but even Rikki could tell that it was much too slow. She sucked her cheeks in and chewed nervously on her lower lip. Rikki watched Harrison for what she knew was only a few minutes, but what felt like an eternity.

Her phone rang suddenly and much too cheerfully. Rikki, startled, jumped a few feet in the air, and then rushed to pick it up quickly so as to not wake her father-in-law.

"Hello?" she whispered.

"It's me," Zane answered.

"Hang on just a sec," Rikki said quietly, moving out into the hallway. "Okay."

"How's he doing?" Zane asked, struggling and failing to keep his voice even.

"I don't think it's too good Zane," Rikki said somewhat chokingly, "I'm not too sure what to do. Iâ€¦|" Rikki, as good as she was in most crises, had difficulty managing emotional situations.

Zane inhaled deeply. "Tell you what," he said, "I'm going to leave the girls with Bella for now. I'll be there soon. See if there's a waiting room where you can sleep for a bit. You must be exhausted."

Rikki nodded wordlessly.

"I love you," Zane said, his voice tinged with bitterness.

"You too," Rikki replied quietly.

She shut the phone and held it tightly for a few seconds. Turning to the duty nurse, Rikki asked if there was a place she could go to rest for a bit until her husband got there. Seeing her pregnant belly and ashen face, the nurse obligingly led her to a quiet waiting area down the hall.

Except for an old man asleep on a chair in the corner the room was empty, and Rikki curled up on a faded red sofa, tucking her jandal-clad feet under her. An unfamiliar tightness was lodged in her throat, and Rikki, after a few moments of vain battle, acquiesced and let the rare tears flow freely.

A strange feeling took hold of her and Rikki suddenly needed to pray. She'd never been particularly religious. A few of the other girls would go to church on a Sunday, but Rikki had always held back,

skeptical and scared. Now, looking around her to make sure no one was watching, Rikki knelt down and clasped her hands. She closed her eyes. Feeling awkward, she opened them again.

"Umâ€|" Rikki began, in an almost inaudible whisper. "Dear God... I think that's what I'm supposed to sayâ€| I don't pretend to hold much credit with you. I've never really had the guts toâ€| umâ€|" Rikki bit her lip, "Please, God, just please let everything be okay. I want him to live, but I know that's not always the way things work out and I don't know if it's even right for me to ask that when maybe it's his time and maybe it's for the best for him, but please don't let him suffer more than need be." The words were coming freely and quickly now. "I justâ€| Help me cope, Lord. Please. Help me cope."

oOoOoOoOo

In the morning, the mermaid village was in a state of subdued disarray. Rikki and Zane had both disappeared in the middle of the night, the latter delivering two sleeping children to Bella's house in the middle of the night with a hurried explanation of the circumstances.

Now, awakening to absent parents and worried faces, the two almost-four-year-olds were surly and vengeful.

Bella attempted to calm Leila when she burst into tears, wheeled quickly after Charlie when she stomped out and ran down to the beach, and separated the two as best she could when they took to biting each other in frustration, but it was no use. The two girls were energetic at the best of times, but utter monstrosities at the worst.

By the time the change of shift rolled around, Bella was exhausted and at her wits' end. "Just take them," she said darkly to Anna, "Just please take them as quickly and as far away from me as possible."

And so it came to pass that on a Saturday afternoon in late May, while her own sons slept angelically in their nursery, Anna Charles ended up tied to a pot plant with brown sugar in her hair and purple glitter paint on her face while the darling children of Mr. and Mrs. Bennett pranced around her tauntingly.

By the time Emma arrived to take over her shift, the two girls were collapsed asleep on the floor, their hair tangled to the others', their faces mud and tear-stained and their clothes strewn across the house. Anna looked up at her, eyes wide and bewildered. She tried to speak, but no words would come.

Emma's success lasted only as long as the children slept. When, just before dinnertime, they awakened, Leila and Charlie bestowed upon their guardian a series of rather nasty and deep tooth marks.

The still sparkingly blue Cleo took the after-dinner shift and was irrevocably scarred by the trauma of coaxing the whirlwind duo into their beds. When at last they both slept, looking surprisingly serene and angelic, Cleo crept over to the main building to sit with the others.

Expressions were worried, were grim, were heartbroken. Emma's face was buried in a tissue and Anna's was tear-stained.

"Rikki called," Bella said quietly.

Cleo nodded, knowing all too well what she was going to say

25. Episode Five, Love and Loss: Part II

30th May 2019

It rained on the day of the funeral. Rikki, overcome with hormones and grief, was not ashamed of her tear-stained face. She stood under a very wide protective umbrella in the rain by the graveside long after the other mourners had left, clasping tightly onto her husband's hand.

Zane was ashen-faced and heartbroken. He too wept silently, mourning the loss of the father he had hated and loved. His black tie was undone and hung loosely on his stiff white shirt. Next to him, Rikki's protruding bump was black-clad, and she wore her unruly blond curls pinned under a black hat.

"He was so good," Zane wept softly, "Such a good man. I never appreciated him."

Rikki kissed Zane's forehead tenderly. "Go inside," she said sympathetically, "Dry off and I'll be in shortly."

Zane, weeping but obliging, turned and left Rikki alone by the graveside.

Rikki picked a few of the lilies growing freely by the graveyard wall and laid them on Harrison's tomb.

Harrison Bennett

October 3 1956 - May 25 2019

"I did love you," she said softly, "I did."

Rikki wiped the tears from her eyes and got up slowly.

She turned around to discover Vanessa Masterton, Zane's long estranged mother, standing behind her, black-clad, somber-faced and pretty in spite of her age. Rikki's sharp intake of breath and suspicious glance made Vanessa take a step forward. She grasped Rikki's hands and smiled feebly.

"Rikki?" she asked in a hoarse voice, "It is Rikki, isn't it."

Rikki nodded, trying not to meet the woman's eyes. How dare she? Rikki thought. After all these years, how dare she come, and at such a time as this? Rikki restrained her anger and managed to smile with gritted teeth at her (now that she thought about it) mother-in-law.

"Please," Vanessa said softly, "I know what you must think of me. I'm sure Zane must have told you all sorts of horrid things about how

I... well..." she trailed off. A slow tear trickled down her cheek.

Rikki, not quite knowing where the newfound sense of altruism suddenly came from, looked into the deep chocolate eyes of her mother-in-law, smiled sincerely and wrapped her arms around her.

"Thank you for coming," Rikki said from the depths of her heart. Sleep-deprivation, pregnancy hormones and sorrow made for a strange combination, and Rikki succumbed to the unnatural comfort that this woman's presence had conjured within her.

"Thank you," she repeated.

oOoOoOoOo

Rikki and Zane would stay at their house on the mainland for now, taking some time to set Harrison's affairs in order. Back on Mako, the mourners had returned somberly by boat. Anna rushed immediately to the restroom to throw up her breakfast. She re-emerged pale and queasy-looking.

"Morning sickness just sucks," she moaned.

Emma smiled sympathetically and conjured a breath mint from her handbag, met with a grateful smile from Anna.

Cleo had mercifully stopped glowing in time for the funeral, but Lewis continued his research, which as of yet bore not fruit. He now rushed back to his office across the courtyard to investigate further.

Bella sat looking out into the rain, a deep melancholy rooted between her eyebrows. Emma came and sat on her lap in the wheelchair, hugging the forlorn blond head.

Bella looked up at her, tears in her eyes.

"I don't get it," she said softly, "How people can just stop living. Even if it's not their fault. And to thinkâ€¦. Iâ€¦ I can't believe I almost put you all through this. Iâ€¦" she faltered.

"I know," Emma reassured her softly, smoothing her furrowed brow, "I'm mighty glad you didn't. I don't think we'd have coped. But it was Harrison's time. And one day it'll be yours too. I just thank God that it wasn't."

Bella smiled up at Emma, squeezing her hand gently.

"Plus we're mermaids," Bella laughed, "Who knows if we shall ever die!"

Suddenly, Cleo stood up from the barstool across the room, knocking down a silver tray with an almighty clang. Unfazed, Cleo grinned elatedly.

"Of course!" she exploded, "Why didn't I think of it before?"

oOoOoOoOo

"Here it is," Cleo laughed, "Fairy caverns. Of course! And here you were looking at scientific databases when all the time we had the information right here in our hands."

Lewis, pleased and yet slightly annoyed by his wife's discovery, took the book from her to peruse its contents.

"So really," Cleo said, "I had fairyâ€¦ magic?... in me for five full days! Oh how exciting!"

Lewis slammed the book shut, smiling and scowling at his wife. "Why," he asked, "Do I seem every day to be bested by this darned leprechaun."

Cleo laughed and fluffed his hair.

oOoOoOoOo

Rikki's feet were curled under her on the leather sofa, a blanket wrapped around her. A little fire blazed in the hearth, for it was a chilling seven degrees Celsius, quite unusual for that time of year. Zane sat beside her and, in the armchair across from them, Vanessa told her story.

"You were ten," she said to Zane, "As sweet a little boy as ever there livedâ€¦ except for a slight tendency towards being spoilt."

Vanessa brown eyes glowed warmly as she spoke of her son.

"But I was miserable," she confided, "I felt strangled and claustrophobic and I just needed to live." Her voice rose exuberantly on the last word.

"I'm sorry I left you, truly I am. I've been sorry of it every day since your father and I divorced. I've always wanted to find you, I just thought that you'dâ€¦ hate me. When I heard of Harrison's death, I knew I had to come see you. Come meet you," she added, smiling at Rikki, "And your children. You're expecting I see?"

"Yes," Rikki raised her eyebrows, "Twins. On top of the twin girls we have at home."

"Goodness me!" Vanessa exclaimed, "Well, if ever you need a live-in nannyâ€¦"

"We may just take you up on that," Zane laughed.

"Oh, and do forgive me for forgetting to wish you a happy anniversary!" Vanessa gushed.

Rikki and Zane exchanged a horrified look. They had both clean forgotten.

"Meh," they said in unison.

It was June. Rikki and Zane, twins terrors in tow, had decided to stay on their mainland house until Rikki's babies arrived, giving them peace (this being a relative term when toddlers are concerned) and time to sort out Harrison's affairs.

On Mako, the others prepared for the annual mid-year race. As per usual, Emma and Ben were taking it very seriously, training daily in the ocean for a month beforehand.

As was fast becoming tradition, Ash, Will and Lewis were essentially left in charge of the cooking, cleaning and child-caring during the week leading up to the race. Anna, whose morning-sickness was by no means limited to the forenoon, decided to opt out of this year's race and help out the non-mer guys, whose previous lack of success in the culinary area needed rectification.

So it was to be that, in the absence of both Rikki and Anna, and aside from the younger children's far less competitive race, two semi-finals and a final would be the only major events of the evening.

Separating Ben and Emma, who would undoubtedly meet in the final, easily decided the pairings for semi-finals.

Bella and Cleo, who by no means took the race seriously, laughed together when, at eight in the morning on the day of the race, discovered Emma and Ben doing laps of the island. Anna, who tended to be a morning person, beckoned them over to where she sat on an Adirondack chair looking out over the sea.

"They've been out there since five," she giggled, "It's ridiculous!"

oOoOoOoOo

Rikki was fast adjusting to Vanessa's calm, warm presence in the house: she was a wonderful cook, a kind comforter and, of superlative importance, an expert babysitter. Rikki marveled at the ease with which she managed Leila and Charlie, who, up until this point, she truly believed had never sat still since their infancy.

Now well into her third trimester, Rikki was very grateful for her mother-in-law. She watched quietly from the sofa as Vanessa masterfully swept through the living room, dusting here and there, popped into the kitchen to check on the evening's casserole, attended to the twins who sat colouring (actually colouring! Rikki marveled) at the dining room table. Her graying russet hair was pinned back with a clip, her lightly wrinkled face pink and smiling, Vanessa managed in a few moments the tasks it would have taken Rikki the entire day to accomplish.

Rikki sighed, contentedly and annoyedly.

oOoOoOoOo

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Lewis proclaimed from the little platform set up on the beach, "Welcome one and all to the third annual mid-year race!"

Anna (holding Thomas), Ash (holding Arianna) and Will cheered from their seats.

"Let the games begin!"

The first race was that of the toddlers. Max, Lucy, Danielle and Matthew, each accompanied by their respective mer-parent, swam out and around Will's boat, anchored some thirty yards offshore. As they turned, it was clear that Matthew and Lucy were leading. The narrow gap between them expanded as Matthew, free from his father's coaxing, shot across the finish line.

The crowd cheered, and Emma smiled (only slightly begrudgingly) at Ben and his winning son.

"Congratulations, Matthew!" she said sweetly.

"Kon-gwaa-ju-laaaayyyy-shuns!" repeated Lucy, more sincerely than her mother.

Next to follow, Jennifer, Eric and Jacob. In the absence of Leila and Charlie (who was his only true athletic rival), Jake won easily and planted a kiss on Jennie's cheek to congratulate himself.

Now came the big races. Each adult semi-final race would lap Mako, finishing in front of the mermaid-owned beach. Emma and Bella now prepared themselves at the start line, tails swishing in the dark blue sea. The sun was in its last moments above the horizon. Emma wore a cap to contain her long blond hair, but Bella let hers flow freely, not caring if it slowed her down.

With the sharp pierce of the whistle, they were off, faster than could be seen by the naked eye. The entirely predictable result was not long awaited. Within two minutes, Emma arrived at the finished line, Bella following about ten seconds later. She smiled at Emma and congratulated her.

Now Ben and Cleo prepared to race, Ben with serious eyes and a hard-set jaw, Cleo laughing about the fact that she hadn't even trained at all. She frowned, realizing that in the past few weeks she'd not even been in the ocean.

Before the whistle blew, Cleo looked back at her tail and noticed that it had retained a faint blue tinge from the incident in the fairy cavern. Up until this point, aside from the biological and magical knowledge acquired thanks to Beasts of the Ages, Cleo had ascertained no noticeable difference in her person. She was rather irritated that the fairy magic hadn't done anything special to her after all (except for turning her blue). Anyway, Cleo thought, mustn't get too distracted. Ben will get a big head if he wins by too large a margin.

Her thought train was interrupted by the cry of the whistle, and Cleo realized that Ben had already shot off.

She swam.

Cleo flew through the water like never before, arriving at the finish

line less than a minute after taking off. She saw people's eyes widen as she pulled herself up onto the shore, smiling brightly.

"Cleo?" Lewis asked, looking strangely at her, then again at the stopwatch, "You do realize you were meant to swim around the _entire_ island, right?"

"I did," Cleo said, "Why?"

She looked around her and realized that Ben was nowhere to be seen. What? Cleo thought, I can't possibly have arrived before him!

A few moments later, Ben's dark blond head popped out of the water, grinning at his expected triumph. His expression shattered horrifically when he saw Cleo sitting on the beach, drying her tail with a towel.

"Um, Cleo?" he asked breathlessly and confusedly.

"Don't ask me!" she said, "I don't get it either."

Emma now returned to the start line to race Cleo for the final. Ben sulked childishly on the beach, horrified and resentful that he had lost to Cleo. CLEO! He shook his head perplexedly.

The whistle blew. The competitors took off. The sun set on the horizon.

Cleo, underwater, was amazed by herself. She had never swum so fast. She realized that she had past the finish line but decided to circuit around the island once more. She lapped Emma about a dozen yards before the finish line, and popped her head out the water jubilantly.

Emma surfaced beside her.

"Did you _lap_ me?" she exclaimed in an awe-filled tone.

Cleo raised her eyebrows and grinned.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," Lewis proclaimed from the platform, "It looks like we have a new champion!"

Dazed and awed by this strange turn of events, the applause from the beach was thunderous.

27. Episode Five, Love and Loss: Part IV

June 20th 2019

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" Jake yelled, "No, no, no, no, Noooo!"

"Jake?" Bella pleaded with him, "C'mon buddy, please?"

"No, mama, no. I won't go," he huffed, folding his little arms across his chest defiantly.

Bella sighed. Why was it always a battle? She was enormously relieved to be free from the wheelchair, having been declared fit to walk

again by Lewis the week prior; however this meant she was now left to cope alone with her two children while Will was at work. Danielle was as passive as ever, but four-year-old Jake, now faced with the revolting (in his eyes) prospect of starting kindergarten, had blatantly refused to grant his mother's requests.

There had been much debate over the schooling of the mermaid children. While it seemed ridiculously dangerous to send them to public school on the mainland, there seemed to be no way around it. Emma and Anna were both keen to home-school their children on Mako, but Cleo, Rikki and Bella could not see it working out well.

So it came to pass that, months after their fourth birthdays , Jake and Jennifer were starting kindergarten today. They would attend the crÃ"che adjacent to the school where Bella worked. Leila and Charlie would join them there after the birth of Rikki's babies.

Mrs. Benjamin (for so she was known as the school's music teacher), would swim over to the mainland with Jake and Jennie each day, where they would quickly dry off and head over to the little kindergarten, clad strappingly in their blue and white uniforms.

As delightful as the prospect sounded to Cleo and Bella, Jennifer was petrified and Jacob rebelled against the idea. It was only eight o'clock and already it had been a long morning.

"Tell you what," Bella said, "If you come with mama and Jennie to school and be a good boy all day, after school we can getâ€|"

Here she bent down and whispered in Jake's ear.

"Ice cream."

His large blue eyes widened at the prospect. Without a further word, he picked up his little green backpack, smiled at his mother and ran to get Jennifer from next door.

oOoOoOoOo

A merry little bell tinkled as the door of _Rikki's CafÃ©_ opened. Zane looked up from the counter and smiled when he saw Rikki come in. She had looked calm ever since his mother had arrived. Doubtful as he had been of Vanessa's motives at first, it seemed that she truly just wanted to get to know her granddaughters. Zane thought about the twins' other grandmother, Cordelia, whose motives toward both her daughter and granddaughters had been so nefarious, with a shudder.

He kissed his wife over the counter, holding on for a little longer than usual. She _was_ looking very pretty today.

"Hey hon, what's up?" Zane asked in a friendly tone, "Kids alright?"

"Yup," Rikki said, "Your mom's got everything under control." There was something strained in her tone.

"Are _you_ alright?" Zane frowned at her odd manner.

"Yeahâ€| I mean noâ€| I meanâ€| THERE'S NOTHING TO DO!" Rikki burst

out, "I'm just so darned bored! Your mother has everything under control, and there's nothing for me to do!"

"Rikki, I'm sure she's just trying to make things easier for you," Zane said with a smile.

"But it's too easy!" Rikki whined, "It's all too easy. I feel so lazy just sitting there while she does my housework, cooks my meals, looks after my children."

"You do realize these are the very things you complain about daily," Zane quipped cheekily.

"Butâ€¦. Grrâ€¦. Zane Bennett, don't mess with me!" Rikki snapped back, "Just give me something to do."

"Fine," Zane said, backing down from his scarily hormonal wife, "We're actually down a waitress, Zoe called in sick this morning. Grab an apron and a notepad, Table Four is waiting to order."

Rikki smirked happily.

The adorable old couple at the window smiled brightly at Rikki as she came over.

"Hey, welcome to Rikki's, I'm Rikki, what can I getcha?" she asked, pulling her pencil out.

"Why hello dear!" the bespectacled old lady said sweetly, "You know what, I haven't even glanced at the menu! Silly old me."

Her rotund, white-haired husband laughed heartily.

Rikki gritted her teeth impatiently, forcing a cheery smile. "That's absolutely fine! Take your time," she said, beginning to wander off.

"Oh no, stay here dearie!" the old lady begged her gently, eyeing up her protruding belly as a conversation point.

"How far along are you?" she asked somewhat nosily.

"Excuse me?" Rikki said, annoyed at the inquisition. She hated people making a big deal of her pregnancy.

"Is it twins?" The old man asked happily, "It's gotta be twins!"

Rikki bit the inside of her cheeks frustratedly. "You think I'm pregnant?" she challenged them.

"Well, um," he said, gesturing to her enormous bump.

"What is wrong with you people?" she exclaimed, "Why can't a woman carry the bulk of her weight on her stomach these days? Gosh!"

"Oh my!" the old woman's face fell, "I'm so sorry. I'm sure I need new glasses, these ones are just terrible."

Rikki relented. "Of course I'm pregnant," she snapped, "Yes it's

twins. Order now or forever hold your peace."

With the couple's hurried orders crushed tight in her hand, Rikki marched back to Zane at the counter.

"Rikki," he began quietly.

"Am I fired?" she asked a smug expression.

Zane raised his eyebrows.

"See you at home!" she said cheerfully, throwing her apron at him.

oOoOoOoOo

The bell tolled shrilly, piercing the morning air. Dozens of vertically challenged, blue-and-white-clad people swarmed around the schoolyard raucously.

Bella, holding Jennie and Jake's hands, slipped in the back door of her classroom, where she knelt down in front of them and smiled.

"Okay," she breathed, "This is it you guys. Good luck! I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time. Remember to stay away from the water and if there's a problem, come to me as soon as possible. You'll be amazing."

She kissed both of their little foreheads, and pulled back to examine their faces.

Jennifer's olive eyes had the faintest glimmer of a tear in them, and her lip quivered nervously, but she stood straight and smiled back at Auntie Bella.

Jake, blue-eyed and a half-head taller than Jennie, looked confident and calm, ready to face head-on the challenges life threw at him. He grinned at his mother, who ruffled his hair playfully.

"Run along now," she said to them, and watched as they joined the mass of blue and white, disappearing into their future.

"Look back!" Bella whispered to her son, far in the distance, "Look back at me." Her eyes pleaded for a last glimpse of him.

He didn't look back.

28. Episode Five, Love and Loss: Part V

June 30th 2019

"Hey, Vanessa, do you mind holding the fort for a little bit?" Rikki asked, "I'm just gonna swim over to Mako to have Lewis take a look at the babies."

"Sure thing!" Vanessa said cheerfully as she layered a lasagna. She returned to the cottage cheese and then stopped suddenly. Vanessa blinked, wondering if she'd heard Rikki correctly. She was going to

swim to _Mako Island_?

"Um, Rikki," she called down the hallway.

"Yeah?"

"What? _Where_ are you going again? _How_ are you getting there?"

Rikki stopped dead in her tracks and gulped. Vanessa didn't know yet. About the mermaids, about their village, about anything. Rikki's mind was working full speed to come up with an explanation.

"Sorry, pregnant brain," she laughed, "I'm just going over to _Mango_ Street to see Lewis, our doctor. You remember Lewis from the funeral? I'm walking there now, not swimming! Goodness me I'm blond!" Rikki chuckled weakly.

"Oh," Vanessa said, almost convinced, "Well do let me drive you, you're in no condition to walk so far!"

Rikki bit her lip. "Oh do please let me walk," she begged, "I really could use the fresh air and exercise!"

Vanessa sighed but complied, and Rikki walked down the street casually until she knew she was out of Vanessa's sight. She continued walking toward the beach, not so much for paranoia but for comfort—the babies really were getting huge. As she swam to Mako, she breathed a sigh of relief. That had almost been pretty close.

In his office, Lewis squirted the ultrasound gel onto Rikki's enormous stomach and waited as she transformed. As he moved the scanner onto her belly, an image came up on the screen. Rikki smiled. Despite the earlier complications, this pregnancy hadn't been too bad.

"So Rikki," Lewis smiled, "I'd say you're due in the latter part of July, probably the 24th or 25th. How's that sound?"

Rikki grimaced. "Just awful. Nearly a month left? Eughhhhhh."

Lewis chuckled at her expression. "And you don't want to know the genders?" he asked slyly.

Rikki ached to let him tell her, but stood firm in her and Zane's mutual resolution to wait until the birth. "No," she said unyieldingly.

"Okaaay..." Lewis teased.

"How's Anna going?" Rikki asked, trying to distract herself.

"Actually, she's about to come in once you're done," Lewis remarked, looking at the time. As he did so there was a rhythmic knock at the door.

"Come in," Rikki called, pulling her top down over the bump.

Anna was trying to grow out her fringe, which was now pinned flat

back to her scalp. Her pretty ginger hair was braided down her back. She smiled at Rikki and ran to hug her.

"It's so good to see you!" Anna gushed, for it had been nearly a month since Rikki and Zane had last been on the island, "How is everything?"

Rikki smiled, her eyes tired, "Really great. Zane's still very sad, of course, and so am I, but Vanessa- you know, Zane's mom- she's been a really great help."

Anna's eyes narrowed warily. "Does she know about you and the girls?"

"Not yetâ€|" Rikki said, biting her lip, "I'm pretty careful never to let her bathe the girls or anything. But I think she's a little suspicious. Of something, at least."

Lewis cleared his throat.

Anna raised her eyebrows at Rikki and giggled before lying down on the doctor's table.

Anna transformed as the gel touched her skin.

"Well, Anna," Lewis said, "Looks like you're due around Christmas!"

Anna smiled and asked Lewis if he could tell the gender yet.

"You sure you want to know?" he teased.

Anna stared unblinkingly at him, eyes shooting flames.

"Alright, alright!" he laughed, "It's a girl!"

Anna squealed in delight. Her own little ballerina! Rikki smiled warmly at her before slipping out the door and swimming back to the mainland.

oOoOoOoOo

Bella and Will had left Jake and Danielle with Emma and taken the boat over to Phoenix Island with a picnic.

They'd barely had a chance to have a romantic day together since Bella got back from Ireland, but they now walked hand in hand through the lush golden grass of Phoenix Island. Will supported Bella tenderly, because she was still somewhat weak from the accident, and together they climbed over the peaked hills of the magical place.

There was a little cove on the far side of the island, a sandy bay where palm trees swayed and the sun was ever-present. Here Bella laid down the picnic blanket and began to set out the food. Sandwiches, apples, burnt cookies and water bottles. It wasn't much- Bella had never been the best chef- but they cared more about the company than the cuisine.

When they had finished their meal, chatting all the while, Will

wrapped an arm around Bella and drew her near. They looked out over the ocean, lost in a moment of perfection. Bella rested her head on Will's strong shoulder and he kissed her forehead gently.

"Jake's getting so old," Bella said sadly, "I feel redundant."

"Hey," Will replied with a laugh, "He's only four! You still read to him every night, you still make his meals, you still adore him. He still adores _you._"

Bella half-smiled, looking pensively at her husband. "It's just sometimes I feel like the whole world is changing all around me and I'm the only one standing still. It scares me that I'll never be any different to how I am now."

"Don't _ever_ change," Will murmured into her golden hair, "I love you just the way you are. You are _perfect_ to me."

"I just don't want to get left behind," Bella sighed.

oOoOoOoOooOoOoO000000

Rikki sensed the tension as she slipped back into her house. Something was wrong. She sniffed the air suspiciously. Burnt lasagna was evident. _Burnt_ lasagna? Rikki's eyes narrowed. Vanessa never let anything burn: that was Rikki's job.

Her panic increased as she saw water on the floor, a shattered glass strewn across the room.

"Vanessa?" Rikki called in an anxious tone. No reply. "Leila? Charlie?"

Rikki walked down the hallway to the bathroom and stood speechless in the doorway.

Leila and Charlie, tails resplendent, swished around in the bathtub. Next to it, Vanessa sat silently watching them, a tear rolling down her wrinkled cheek.

When she heard Rikki, she looked up, her face unreadable. Rikki's eyes widened at Vanessa's long silence. When at last she spoke, Vanessa's voice was cold and pained.

"You have got some explaining to do."

29. Episode Six, Eye of the Storm: Part I

Vanessa had sat in stunned silence as Rikki explained, from the very beginning, the _truth_ about the lives of herself and her family. She was careful to leave out mention of the other girls, for safety's sake, but in all other respects was entirely open and honest with her mother-in-law.

Vanessa inhaled shakily. She closed her eyes and Rikki could tell she was running the whole day over in her head, checking for signs that this might all be a dream.

After what seemed to Rikki to be an age, Vanessa spoke softly, looking earnestly at Rikki with somber eyes.

"Thank you," she nearly whispered, "It means a lot to me that you trust me. I promise to keep your secret."

It wasn't until Rikki exhaled at this that she realized she'd been holding her breath in fear and anxiety. Relief flooded through her.

"But I don't think I can stay," Vanessa said, sucking in her cheeks, "I justâ€¦" she shook her head. "I'll stay until my little grandsons are born,"

Rikki's head snapped up at this. "We don't know the genders!" she frowned.

"Just a feeling," Vanessa answered, "I'll stay until you have the babies, but no longer."

Rikki nodded, a tiny tear escaping her eye. Vanessa put her arms around Rikki and let her cry into her shoulder.

oOoOoOoOo

8th July 2019

"Ben!" Anna called out to him from below the scaffolding.

"Hey sweetheart!" he exclaimed, looking down at her in surprise, "Whatcha doing here?"

Anna, with Matthew and Thomas in tow, had taken a hike over the crater of Mako to the far side of the island. Here, the marine reserve stood tall and somewhat naked-looking, surrounded by scaffolding and building materials. A team of about eight builders, including Ben, worked steadily in the weak July sun, hidden behind a wall of mid-afternoon cloud. A gang of ominous dark clouds threatened in the distance.

Ben swung down from the scaffolding and gave Anna a quick peck on the lips.

"We just thought we'd come and see how it's all coming along!" Anna explained, "It's incredible! Well done."

Ben picked up Matthew and ruffled his short ginger hair. "Should be done before schedule at the rate we're going," he exclaimed happily, "If everything runs smoothly, I'd say we'll be done by the start of December. Hopefully before the baby's born!"

Anna smiled at her handsome husband. He was so dedicated to work and family alike. She wanted to stay and watch him all day, but the weather worried her. She frowned at the black clouds on the horizon.

"Hey, be sure to get in before it rains," she warned, "The guys can't know aboutâ€¦ well, you know."

Ben laughed at his wife's anxiety. "Don't worry so much! You'll wrinkle that pretty face of yours," he chided cheekily.

A lightning bolt streaked across the sky, followed soon after by a distant rumble of thunder.

Anna tilted her head and raised her eyebrows at her husband.

He relented and called out to his building crew. "Alright fellas, I think we'll call it a day. Weather's starting to look pretty menacing. See you bright and early tomorrow morning. I'll be sure to call if anything changes."

The men began to pack up and Anna smiled gratefully Ben. Once the last of the crew had hopped into the motor boat and it took off towards the mainland, Anna pulled out a sturdy umbrella and handed it to Ben.

With their two children held tightly, the two walked quickly back to the mermaid village, arriving just before the rain fell.

oOoOoOoOo

Emma glanced out the window with worried eyes. "I don't like the look of that storm," she said anxiously to Cleo, biting her lip. Outside the wind howled ferociously, and the rain pelted down in heavy sheets.

She'd had the good sense to bring bedding and other necessities into the main communal area before the rain kicked in, knowing that in a storm any movement between the houses would be all but impossible. Arianna slept peacefully in a basinet by Emma's armchair, and she'd made up the main house guest room with spare cots for the others. Emma's gut was churning, achingly nervous about the incoming storm.

Cleo brushed it off with a flick of her hand. "I'm sure it's nothing," she said optimistically, "A spot of rain, nothing more." Her hammering heart did not match her cheerful expression. Cleo's mind raced with scenarios of Jennifer being caught in a storm on the mainland, far away from her and afraid. Cleo smiled on, to calm Emma's nerves.

Anna came over to sit by them, holding a fussy Thomas in her arms. "He doesn't like storms," she explained quietly.

The wind shrieked outside, and Thomas whimpered. Lucy ran over and buried her face in Emma's lap. Emma picked her up and cuddled her comfortingly.

"It's okay," Eric said knowingly to Matthew and Max, who looked up to him greatly, "It's not a scary monster, it's just a thunderstorm. They can't hurt you."

Lewis and Ben, listening keenly into the little boys' conversation, exchanged a look. They were both well aware of the hurt that a storm could do.

Anna was counting on her fingers. "So Will, Bella, Rikki, Zane, Ash,

Leila, Charlie, Danielle, Jacob and Jennifer are all still on the mainland?"

Cleo gulped at the last name.

Emma nodded, saying a silent prayer in her head for Ash and the others.

Anna turned on the television. The reception was terrible, but it was indeed an emergency weather report.

Some brunette with unusual energy levels was pointing to a huge tropical depression engulfing much of Australia. "If you're living on the Gold Coast," she warned, "I'd be preparing to pack in for a few days at least. This cyclone is huge! With wind speeds nearing two hundred kilometers an hour, this is sure to be classed as a Type Five Sever Tropical Cyclone. Be prepared to evacuate if necessary. More on that later in the news hour."

"Anna, would you please turn it off?" Emma whispered, white as a sheet.

The phone rang, barely audible over the pelting rain. Lewis jumped to pick it up.

"Oh heyâ€| yupâ€| uh-huhâ€| okayâ€| alright, we'll see you later."

All eyes were on Lewis as he resettled the phone in its cradle.

"They're all safe," he said briefly.

The room breathed a sigh of relief.

"They'll stay at Rikki and Zane's place tonight, and see what the weather's like in the morning."

As he spoke, a great flash of lightning lit up the tumultuous sea, and the power went out with a loud crack.

30. Episode Six, Eye of the Storm: Part II

Suddenly in pitch black, Cleo, Anna and Lucy all screamed. Arianna woke and began wailing. Matthew ran to Anna and hid in the folds of her skirt.

Emma transferred her terrified toddler into Cleo's shaking arms and ran to the kitchen. She re-emerged a few minutes later with eight long-life flashlights and an assortment of candles in a plastic bag. She passed these to Ben to distribute and scooped up her frightened baby, kissing her soft little head tenderly.

Always reliable in a crisis, Emma began to delegate tasks, calming everyone by dictating and organizing.

"Ben, there's a gas cooker in the closet under the stairs, would you please get that for me? Cleo, please pop upstairs and bring all the bedding and cots down- I don't think it's safe to sleep up there."

Lewis, would you please light the fire? There are some matches in the kitchen, top drawer on the left. Anna, see if you can find some tinned food in the pantry, and let me know what else we have. Eric, my darling, would you please get Max and Matthew to help you set the table for dinner?"

Everyone accounted for, Emma set Arianna, whose huge blue eyes were wide with fright, down in her basinet, and picked up Thomas.

"Shh, buddy, it's okay!" she crooned, before placing him in the portable crib that Cleo had hauled down the stairs. Lucy was huddled under a blanket on the sofa, and Emma saw no need to rearrange her. She picked up Arianna again, tucking her into a baby sling and wrapping her tight to her chest.

Anna reappeared with a solemn look. "We've got almost nothing," she said, "But there are a few meals in the freezer."

"That's good," Emma nodded, "Grab the minestrone and start heating it. Where's Ben with the cooker?"

Despite the raging storm and the lack of power, Emma managed to create quite a pretty meal. With the candles glowing charmingly on the table, the island-bound half of the mermaid community enjoyed a hearty soup with smiles on their faces but worry in their eyes.

That night as they went to bed, Emma's calm confidence shattered. As she brushed out her long hair by candlelight, she suddenly burst into tears. Anna, coming through the bathroom door, looked at her with concern.

Emma, noticing Anna's presence, wiped her eyes and laughed feebly. "I'm so sorry!" she said, "You must think me such a wuss. Everyone else is coping fine."

Anna touched Emma's arm gently. "What's up?" she asked, and by the tone in her voice Emma realized that Anna could tell it was more than just the storm.

"I don't think I've ever told you- any of you- before. When I was about eight, there was a storm. My dad and I were out sailing and it was pretty bad. I fell overboard€ nearly drowned. It was after that that I became such a swimmer. I didn't want anything to happen like that ever again."

Anna nodded. "It's understandable you're afraid of storms after that."

"That's not all," Emma said, eyes red from tears and tiredness.

"You can tell me," Anna said sensitively.

"I didn't say goodbye this morning. To Ash, I mean. I didn't kiss him or tell him I love him or anything. I was mad because he'd €" Emma paused and frowned, "I don't even remember why I was mad at him. I let him leave in a huff and I was glad to see him go. And now I may never see him again." A steady stream of gentle tears had rolled down her face as she spoke.

Anna smiled. She wrapped Emma up in a hug and laughed. "You are such

a drama queen sometimes. _We're_ not going to die. _They're_ not going to die. Honestly, Emma, you really do overreact."

Emma, annoyed at her friend's lack of sympathy, was nevertheless comforted by her carefree attitude. The two returned to the living room, where Cleo and Lewis were fast asleep in each other's arms. Ben snored quietly, sprawled out on the sofa. Anna and Emma crawled into their sleeping bags and blew out the last candle. The storm raged on outside, the wind howling with an absurd ferocity.

Emma buried her face in her pillow. "I _do_ _love_ you," she whispered to Ash, far away and yet so near, "I truly do."

oOoOoOoOo

Unbeknownst to her, Ash was braving the elements for the sake of his horses. Past ten, eleven, midnight, he ran through the paddocks, ensuring that each and every one of his beloved beasts was safe in their stables. This he managed single-handedly, for none of his staff were willing to face the storm. Rain poured down his back, the roaring wind whipped his dark hair into his eyes.

When at last he returned to the stables with what he believed to be the final stallion, Ash realized that one of his mares was missing. And not just any mare: Aurora, his beautiful Lipizzaner, who was currently with foal.

Ash cursed the storm and ran back into it. Lightning streaked the sky and thunder crashed disharmoniously overhead. In the far paddock, Ash heard the panicked whinny of the frightened horse. She lay prostrate on the ground, quite obviously in labor.

Ash threw his hands up in the air and screamed in frustration. Ignoring the wind and the rain, he bent down to help Aurora with the birth.

The foal was breech, and the frightened mare groaned fearfully. Ash skillfully took hold of the foal's hooves and pulled gently to help Aurora. After a few minutes, the foal was born and Ash exclaimed jubilantly, rain pouring down on the trio. He gently picked up the heavy foal and hoisted him- Ash thought he caught a glimpse- over his shoulder.

Leading Aurora back to the stables, Ash dried off both mother and baby and set the new foal to nurse at his mother's side. His- yes, Ash was sure now- spindly legs wobbled as he stood for the first time, but the foal steadied himself and nursed happily. Ash breathed a sigh of relief.

oOoOoOoOo

By morning the rain had eased, but the wind still blew viciously. Lewis, the only non-mermaid present, decided to brave the elements to go examine the power generator, much to Cleo's chagrin. She flung open the door and ran out after him into the rain.

"You _cannot_ go out in this storm," she screeched at him over the wind. Suddenly, she collapsed as she transformed, mermaid tail appearing due to the fat droplets of rain that still fell. "Darn it,"

she muttered under her breath. Ben, clad in a full-length raincoat, picked Cleo up and carried her inside. "He'll be fine," he reassured the fuming Cleo. Her eyes shot flames at him.

Anna quickly set about drying Cleo's tail off with her powers. "Did you sleep okay last night?" Anna asked, trying to take Cleo's mind off her idiot husband.

"Fine," Cleo said shortly.

"Have you got reception on your cell?" Emma asked to no one in particular.

"Nope," Anna said, flicking her phone open and shut, "Everything's out. One of the drawbacks to island living. Hopefully Lewis can get some of it working again."

"How about the radio?" Ben asked, "If not, we'll have no connection with the outside world at all."

Emma went to the cupboard to find the emergency radio.

Outside, the rain quickened and lightening illuminated the choppy sea. A few moments later, Lewis burst through the door, soaked to the bone.

"Huge tree fell on generatorâ€|" he related, gasping for breath, "Can't get it up and running again till storm's cleared. Looks like we're stuck."

There was a burst of static fuzz as Emma tuned the radio. A foggy report began to emerge from the buzzing.

"Gold coastâ€| cyclone is lookingâ€| it would beâ€| at least three daysâ€| a weekâ€| insideâ€| evacuationâ€| until further notice."

Anna raised her eyebrows. "Did you get anything from that?"

"Looks like we'll be here a while!" Cleo exclaimed grimly.

31. Episode Six, Eye of the Storm: Part III

July 12th 2019 on the mainland

"Well this is awful," Bella moaned, looking out the window and seeing nothing but gray.

"Could be worse," Rikki retaliated cheerfully, "Power's still on."

Bella wrinkled her nose at Rikki's optimism. "I sure do hope the others are okay. Storm's pretty brutal. And we haven't heard from them in over four days."

"Don't worry," Zane reassured her, "The water-houses won't budge. I think they'd pretty much withstand anything."

"Still," Bella pondered grimly. She was so glad that her family was

in tact. By pure coincidence she'd decided to bring Danielle to school with her yesterday, and when the storm set in she and the kids met up with Will at Rikki and Zane's house. They'd spent the night all curled together in one of the Bennetts' spare beds.

Bella felt sorry for Ash, who was stranded on the mainland without any of his family, but most of all she ached for poor little Jennie, five years old and isolated from her parents. The brave little girl didn't even let Bella see that she'd been crying all night (though she had heard her soft sobs).

"I'm going to try calling Mako again," Ash said. After a minute, he put the phone back down, face crestfallen. Bella's heart practically broke at his pained expression.

"Mama," Jake said, coming over and draping himself across Bella's lap, "We're a little bit bored."

Bella looked over at Jennifer, Leila and Charlie, who sat with their faces in their hands, staring blankly at the wall. Although she could tell it was posed, Bella's heart softened. Goodness knew she could use something to do anyway. Bella got up and ran around the room, grabbing Leila's hand as she passed.

"Tag on," she called to the others. Jennie grabbed Leila's hand, Jake grabbed Jennie's and Charlie grabbed Jake's.

Bella yodeled loudly, attempting to drown out the howling wind, as she ran down the hallway and up the stairs. The children joined into her antics willingly, glad to be entertained. Bella skipped along the staircase balcony until she got to Leila and Charlie's room. She pulled the children in with her and shut the door.

"Okay," she whispered, "Grab all the blankets and pillows off the bed."

The children willingly complied and Bella grabbed the two armchairs from by the window and positioned them in the centre of the room. She threw the duvet over this and piled the pillows underneath, creating a cozy little fort. Bella grabbed a flashlight, turned off the lights and hid under the fort. The children stifled giggles as they watched Bella's dramatic face.

"All right," she said enigmatically, "What shall we be?"

"Soldiers!" Jake exclaimed. "Bear cubs," Jennie suggested. "Fairies!" Leila sang. "Umâ€¦ ummâ€¦" Charlie frowned, mind racing to come up with a better idea than everyone else, "Dragons!"

Bella flinched slightly. Her last encounter with a dragon hadn't ended too well. She brushed past the moment for the sake of the bored children.

"I think," she said, face veiled by the darkness, "I'd like to be a wizard. Lumos!" she exclaimed, turning on the flashlight she'd had hidden under her sweater. The children all squealed in delight.

oOoOoOoOo

Back on Mako, life was pretty miserable. Without electricity or running water, and a quickly depleting supply of food, the island-bound mermaids were beginning to worry.

The storm had worsened again in the night, and there was no chance at all of leaving the main building. Lewis had hoped, if the weather had cleared, to go fix the generator today, but no such fortune was bestowed upon him. Everyone was beginning to get cabin fever cooped up inside with very little to do.

Anna and Ben had spent the morning sealing all of the door and window frames with their powers, for the storm water had begun to affect even the high ground on which the village sat. Water had continued to rise overnight until it now flooded the garden, nearly a foot high surrounding the buildings.

Cleo was actually beginning to panic a bit.

"What if the storm never eases?" she asked Emma frantically that afternoon, "What if we're stuck here forever. In this room. This small, small room. I'm getting claustrophobic. I feel paranoid, like someone is plotting this just to separate me from my daughter."

Emma blinked, slightly worried about Cleo. She looked intently at her, trying to remember the basic medicine training she'd done as part of her degree. There had been something about Cabin Fever, hadn't there been?

"It's okay, Cleo," Emma said in a slow, calm voice, "It's only been four days. Don't worry about it. Hopefully we're past the worst of it. But I think you need to get some fresh air."

Cleo nodded, her eyes wild. "I think I'm going insane. I'll just pop out for a minute."

Emma cringed at the comment. Why was it that just before anything bad happened, someone reassured their companions that they'd 'just be a minute'?

"I'll come with you," Emma said firmly.

In the end, everyone decided to come along - claustrophobia was mutual amongst the group.

Clad from head to toe in hat, raincoats, umbrellas, gloves and galoshes, the mermaids (plus Lewis) headed out for a nature walk. Exiting through the unsealed, high ground back door, everyone breathed a sigh of delight as they stepped out into the fresh, wet air. Umbrellas were quickly abandoned when the wind proved too strong, but all managed to stay dryâ€| for the most part.

Max, as clumsy as both his parents combined, slipped and fell into a puddle, his little orange tail appearing about thirty seconds later. Cleo laughingly scooped him up and Anna used her power to dry him.

"Oh my gosh," Lewis stopped suddenly in his tracks.

Cleo looked back at him curiously. "What's up?"

"Nothing, nothing, you _go on ahead,_" Lewis insisted, beckoning surreptitiously to Emma and Anna. He waited until Cleo was out of earshot.

"It's her birthday," he hissed under his breath, "Her 30th birthday. Shoot!"

Emma and Anna's eyes widened. They'd evidently both forgotten as well.

"Oh dear," Emma murmured anxiously.

"What are we going to do?" Lewis asked frantically.

Ben had realized they were behind and had run back to see what the problem was. "What's going on?" he asked jovially.

"It's Cleo's birthday and we forgot!" Emma said miserably.

"I think we were just so preoccupied," Anna tried to explain, "What with the storm, and the being stranded and whatnot!"

"What are we going to do?" Lewis repeated, shaking his head tragically.

"Go along and catch up with her," Emma said to the men, "And Anna and I will go back and figure something out. Tell her that Arianna and Thomas got fussy and we decided to head home. Stall her as long as you can."

oOoOoOoOo

When Cleo arrived back the house was dark. This was unremarkable, seeing as the storm clouds covered the sun entirely and the power had been out for nearly four days. More surprising was that Anna and Emma hadn't bothered to turn any of the battery lanterns on.

She wandered into the dining room and gasped.

"You guys!" Cleo exclaimed, a huge grin spreading across her face.

Before she'd returned, Emma and Anna had spread Emma's most beautiful tablecloth across the table, lit dozens and dozens of pink tea light candles and filled a vase with rain-battered roses. Anna had sculpted and Emma had frozen a beautiful ice sculpture with _Happy Birthday Cleo_ engraved on it.

Cleo was truly touched by the effort they'd gone to. She had all but forgotten about her birthday, and had never expected anyone else to remember.

She kissed Lewis tenderly and hugged all her friends. Well, not all of them.

oOoOoOoOo

"Hey!" Ash said thoughtfully, "Isn't it Cleo's birthday today?"

"Oh yeah!" Bella, Zane and Will exclaimed simultaneously. They felt

bad that they weren't there to celebrate with her.

The children had all been put abed many hours ago, wearied by the ongoing storm. Vanessa had also gone to bed early with a migraine. She'd dutifully attended Zane and Rikki and their friends in a way that was kind but aloof over the past few days. Zane would sometimes catch his mother looking at him sadly, but she'd avert her eyes as soon as he noticed, busying herself with some task or other.

The five adults sat in armchairs around a blazing fire. Outside the storm _still_raged. There was no chance of leaving the house at all. Conversation was sparse: everyone was content to be quiet. Bella was curled up in Will's lap, watching the fire crackle cheerfully in contrast to the tempestuous gloom outside. Ash was reading the newspaper, his mind preoccupied. Zane was attempting to complete a Sudoku that Bella had challenged him to try, but he had never been good with numbers and was failing terribly. Rikki was looking quite ill on the floor in the corner.

A huge bolt of lightening fractured the sky, followed by a deep, elongated rumble of thunder.

Rikki suddenly looked up, face pale.

"I think my water just broke."

****Author's Note:** Sorry it's going a bit slowly- will pick up soon. Don't forget to answer the poll on my profile page- who do you want to see more of in this story? Look forward to your feedback!**

32. Episode Six, Eye of the Storm: Part IV

Rikki, soaked in amniotic fluid, rolled her eyes as she realized she had transformed.

"Whoops," she groaned, and quickly used her power to dry herself off. After a minute or so her tail disappeared.

Meanwhile, Zane had run to the bedroom to fit the plastic sheet to the bed, but realized that they hadn't bought one yet. So like the Bennetts to be ill equipped and under-prepared.

Will, squeamish as he was when it came to the birthing process, quietly slipped away and hid in the kitchen. Bella bobbed down and tried to help Rikki.

"Have you had any contractions yet?" she asked methodically.

"Nothing out of the ordinary- just those Braxton-Hicks ones," Rikki scanned her mind for any pain.

"Um? Okayâ€¦" Bella said uncertainly, for she didn't know the first thing about delivering a baby. When Jacob was born she'd been unconscious for most of the labor, and had given birth in mermaid form. Danielle on the other hand had been the easiest birth ever, and slipped out in less than two hours labor. Bella was very inexperienced when it came to biological matters.

She did, however, realize that it would be wise for Rikki to prepare for labor. She helped her dress in a loose cotton nightgown, braided her hair and laid down an old picnic cloth on the bed.

"Grr," Rikki muttered, "I'm not due for another twelve days!"

Ash was dialing Mako again, trying to get hold of Lewis, without whom none of the girls had ever delivered a baby.

"Darn it!" he exclaimed, "Still no connection."

"It's alright," Rikki said composedly, sitting comfortably on the bed, "I don't think the babies will be here any time soon."

But Rikki, as often was the case, missed the mark entirely. Within five minutes of that comment, her first contractions began arriving, and from that point on were close together, long and _extremely_ painful.

"Zane Bennett," Rikki said, teeth gritted after the most recent contractions, "I actually, truly, hate you. You did this to me!"

Zane sheepishly sat down in the corner of the room.

Rikki cried out in pain as the next contraction arrived. "If I ever see Lewis again I'm going to ****murder**** him," Rikki snarled, "Stupid storm! Stupid Lewis! Argghhhhhhhh..."

Ash, whose birthing experience was mostly limited to horses, helped Rikki in every way he could, but in the absence of a qualified doctor and, more importantly, Lewis' well-beloved epidural, Rikki was not coping too well.

In a rare moment of calm, Rikki turned to Bella, whose hand she had practically broken in her tight vice, with pleading eyes.

"Would you go get Vanessa for me?" Rikki begged her.

Rikki was immediately soothed by the older woman's presence.

"Why didn't you get me sooner?" she asked softly, "I did at one point train as a midwife."

Ash, Bella, Zane and Rikki all look in astonishment and annoyance at Vanessa.

"WHY did you not TELL me that BEFORE?" Rikki yelled, her body racked by a contraction. "Sorry," she apologized for her anger when the pain had passed.

oOoOoOoOo

An hour later

"Alright Rikki, the baby's crowning!" Vanessa smiled encouragingly, "Just a few more minutes."

Ash and Bella had joined Will in the kitchen, wanting to give Rikki some privacy.

"I'm going to need you to give a big push with this next contraction."

"I don't want to!" Rikki wailed, her face red and streaked with sweat.

"Come on Rikki!" Zane cheered her on, "I believe in you."

She shot him a glare, then gripped his hand tighter as the contraction came.

"AHH! Rikki, you're burning me," he exclaimed, his hand welting from her power. She didn't even notice, too focused on the dizzying pain.

"Rikki, I need you to try harder," Vanessa said, "Come on, push!"

Rikki pushed and nothing happened. "I'm trying," she gasped, "It really hurts."

She fell back with a thud onto the pillow and waited for the next contraction. She didn't have long to prepare herself, for within ten seconds she needed to push again.

Her eyes squinted tightly shut, Rikki focused all her energy into delivering this baby.

Vanessa gripped the baby by its shoulders and pulled, and Rikki suddenly heard the soft panicked wail of a newborn.

She exhaled happily, closed her eyes and collapsed on the bed.

"Thank goodness," she breathed.

"Well, darling, it's a boy," Vanessa exclaimed jubilantly.

"A boy?" Rikki smiled, squeezing Zane's hand affectionately, "Oh, a boy!"

"Congratulations," Zane kissed Rikki's sweaty forehead.

"Little Harrison," she murmured as Vanessa transferred the rather purple-faced infant into his mother's arms.

"What?" Zane asked curiously.

"I think we should call him Harrison," Rikki said, looking earnestly at her husband. An almost unnoticeable tear escaped out of the corner of his eye.

"AAAh!" Rikki gasped suddenly, gripped with pain.

"Alright, ready for round two?" Vanessa asked optimistically.

"Huh?" Rikki frowned. She'd forgotten she was having twins. "Oh yeah!" She passed Harrison back into his father's arms and prepared for more contractions.

The second baby came easier, and within a few minutes was out in the world. Rikki looked into his clear gray eyes, smiling.

"What do you think of Ethan?" Zane asked her, hoping that he might be responsible for the naming of at least one of their four children.

"I like it," Rikki agreed, "Ethan and Harry. Our boys." Pride swelled up inside her at the thought of her boys, strong and good, facing the world with a cheeky smile. Rikki grinned.

There was a timid knock at the door.

"Can we come in?" Bella's melodious voice came.

"Of course!" Rikki exclaimed, a bit too loudly.

Ash, Bella and Will tumbled into the room and rejoiced along with Rikki, Zane and Vanessa at the happy coming of two healthy baby boys.

oOoOoOoOo

Later that night (well, by that point it was almost morning), Rikki lay unsleeping on her bed. The newborns snoozed peacefully in their shared crib, blissfully unaware of the raging storm outside.

"Zane," Rikki whispered. There was no reply save some gentle snoring from her husband's side of the bed.

Rikki got up quietly and tiptoed down the hall. She snuck into Vanessa's room and lay down on the bed beside her.

"Mum," Rikki said, dazed by a lack of sleep. She didn't realize she'd said the word until later, but it immediately filled her with a warm fuzzy feeling.

Vanessa rolled over and smiled sleepily at Rikki.

"You did so well," she said warmly.

"Thank you for being here," Rikki said from the depths of her heart, "I couldn't have done it without you."

"I'm glad I stayed for this. I can't imagine missing the birth of my grandsons," Vanessa said quietly.

"When are you going to leave?" Rikki asked.

"In four days," Vanessa replied, sadness tingeing her voice, "I've booked a plane ticket to Spain. I think I'll stay there for a while."

"Wow!" Rikki said hoarsely, "Spain. Gosh."

"Hey, if ever you need some sun," Vanessa chuckled, "You know where to find me. I want you to visit me. I want to visit you. I don't just want to be that distant grandmother who sends a card on birthdays but never sees her grandchildren. Leila and Charlie are wonderful- I

truly love them. And I couldn't bear not knowing Ethan and Harrison. But you do understand why I need to leave, right?"

Rikki nodded. She did understand, but that didn't make it any less hard. She'd grown very fond of Vanessa. She filled the gap that her own mother never had. Vanessa was responsible, and kind, and unselfish. Rikki had never known that in a mother. She would truly miss her.

"Love you," Rikki kissed her mother-in-law's forehead and popped back to her own room.

She stood for a moment by the crib, watching her sons sleep. Moonlight flooded through the window, the shadows of storm-ravaged trees dancing about on her boys' faces.

"Just so you know," Rikki said to her sleeping infants, "I may not be the best of mothers. I may do things wrong. A lot. I may mess up and be mad and make mistakes. But never doubt that I love you. I love you more than anything else in the world. Don't ever forget that."

33. Episode Six, Eye of the Storm: Part V

As Cleo woke up just before eight on Saturday the 13th of July, she smiled. Warm rays of light fell upon her face, and she stretched like a contented cat in the morning sun. Wait. _Sun_?

Cleo's eyes opened with a start. No, she wasn't hallucinating. Clear, beautiful beams of sunlight poured through the windows, dancing across the room pleasantly and gracing the faces of her sleeping friends.

"Ha!" Cleo shouted jubilantly, accidentally waking Emma and Ben in the process. Luckily both Lewis and Anna were heavy sleepers.

"Is that what I think it is?" Emma yawned happily.

Ben was abruptly on his feet and at the window, smiling at the sun. "How I missed you!" he laughed at the estranged friend.

"Does this mean the storm's over?" Emma asked, a broad grin forming on her face.

"I hope so," Cleo murmured.

"Mama, mama, mama!" Eric called delightedly as he ran into the room, "It's not raining any more!"

Matthew, Lucy and Max followed, similarly delighted by the discovery.

Anna, groggily awakening at the noise, gasped in delight. She got up quickly and flung open the French doors.

Outside, enormous puddles adorned the muddy ground and downtrodden flowers lay dead in water-clogged beds, but the sun shone warmly, casting a new lease of life on the saturated village.

The children skipped delightedly, frolicking and splashing in the

puddles, forgetting that in a few moments they'd transform.

"Okay," Emma said, into organization mode, "First things first, let's get the power up and running again. Then we can cook some pancakes!"

Cleo ran inside to wake her snoring husband.

"Whaaa?" he moaned when she poked him.

"Get up, lazy puss! The sun is shining, the sky is blue and we need our handyman."

Lewis rolled over uncooperatively, so Ben decided to go fix the generator instead.

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"Hey boys!" Rikki crooned gently, watching her sons awaken in their crib. Warm rays of sunlight streaked across their pink cheeks.

Zane, half buried under the duvet, opened one eye a crack and watched Rikki.

Her face was positively radiant. He hadn't seen her look so truly at peace since— he couldn't even think of the last time she hadn't either looked miserable or looked like she was trying to hide her misery.

Now, her soft fair hair falling in wisps out of a messy ponytail, her cheeks rosy and her smile lovely, Rikki watched her babies watch her.

They were identical, she thought. Their faces were undoubtedly the same; their eyes matched perfectly. Rikki frowned as she tried to recall which was which. She couldn't quite remember.

Noticing Zane for the first time, she implored his help.

"Hey sleeping beauty!" she smiled at him, "Do you remember who's who?"

Zane's brow furrowed. "Um," he paused, "I think Ethan had gray eyes?"

"They both have gray eyes," Rikki said, raising her eyebrows comically.

"Hmmm—.." Zane bit his lip pensively.

oOoOoOoOo

Bella picked up the phone after the second ring.

"Hello, Bennett residence," she answered politely, reveling in the sunshine.

"Bella?" a voice asked, "It's Anna!"

"Oh my gosh!" Bella squealed, "Are you guys all okay? Why didn't you

call sooner? Did you make it through the storm? Oh my gosh!"

Anna laughed at the other end of the line. "Calm down, Bells! We're all okay. We didn't call sooner because we've had no power for the past six days. Ben only just got the generator up and running. Storm was really awful here, but we all made it through okay. Mako's taken a bit of a bashing though. The village flooded and there are a bunch of trees knocked down. We haven't really surveyed the damage yet. We're gonna head over to the reserve building later. Just hoping that it hasn't been destroyed! How's everything there? Uneventful I hope."

Bella giggled. "Not exactly!" she snickered, "There are two new people here. Born at about one this morning. Male, rather bald and trÃ©s cute!"

Now it was Anna's turn to squeal in excitement. "Oh my gosh! Rikki had her babies?" There was some excited babble on the Mako end of the line as Anna relayed this news to her companions. There was much squealing.

Anna came back on the line breathless from excitement. "We're going to swim over now. I think it should be safe. Oh my gosh!"

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About a half an hour later, there was a rhythmic knock at the door. Will flung it open and discovered eleven mermaids, all with ecstatic grins and baited breath.

"Hey you guys!" Will exclaimed, hugging all his friends in turn.

Coming down the stairs, Ash grinned and jumped over the banister. Her scooped Emma up in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"I love you so much," he said, smoothing her hair back.

"I love you too," Emma said, gazing adoringly into his eyes, "I'm so sorry."

"Forgiven and forgotten. I hope I am too," Ash said compassionately. "Forgiven, I mean, not forgotten," he added with a laugh. He set his wife down gently and wrapped his two elder children in a huge bear hug.

Cleo, meanwhile, had bounded up the stairs two at a time. She exploded into Leila and Charlie's room and pounced on Jennifer, who sat playing quietly. She held her as tightly as she could, kissing her repeatedly and swinging her around.

"Jennie!" Cleo exhaled lovingly, "I missed you so much! I love you."

"I love you too Mum," Jennie said gently, "But you're kinda suffocating me."

"Oh," Cleo said, loosening her grip, "Sorry."

Lewis and Max had followed Cleo up the stairs, and the little family now hugged and kissed, glad to be reunited with their beloved daughter.

Anna, meanwhile, had crept up the stairs and knocked gently on the door of the master suite.

"It's Anna," she called, "May I come in?"

She heard Rikki's little cry of delight, and Zane opened the door almost instantaneously.

Anna ran to hug Rikki warmly. "I hear congratulations are in order?" she asked the proud parents. Rikki, wrapped in blankets and holding a cup of coffee, smiled contentedly from the bed.

"Anna," Zane said, "I'd like you to meet the newest members of the Bennett family."

Zane gently picked up a baby from the crib and transferred him into Anna's expert arms.

"That isâ€¦ umâ€¦" Zane looked at Rikki, wondering which of the boys he should claim it was.

"Er, Ethan David," Rikki said with a smile.

"Hello! Hello Ethan," Anna smiled at the baby's beautiful grey eyes.

"And this," Zane said, more sure of himself this time, "Is Harrison Patrick."

"Oh! Like your dad?" Anna asked Zane with a slightly sad look in her eyes.

"Yup," Rikki and Zane said quietly in unison.

Anna smoothed over the moment quickly. "Well they're just the handsomest things ever!"

Emma and Cleo came tumbling through the door, anxious for a glance at the new babies.

"Ohhhhh!" They crooned simultaneously. Anna passed Ethan to Cleo, and Zane put Harrison in Emma's arms.

Emma beamed at the baby in her arms. "Well helloâ€¦."

"Harrison," Anna said helpfully.

"Why hello Harrison!" she said softly, "I'm your Auntie Emma. Yes, hi! And just to let you know, if you ever need chocolate chip cookies, do not ask your Auntie Cleo."

Cleo blushed embarrassedly, well aware of her own lack of baking ability. The last time she'd tried to make chocolate chip cookies, a few weeks ago, she'd used salt instead of sugar, had forgotten to add the eggs and had burnt them to a crisp. When it came to Cleo, culinary endeavours were best when not attempted at all.

"And who's this?" Cleo asked.

"That's Ethan," Zane said with a proud grin, "I chose the name."

"Wow, one out of four, good going Papa," Anna laughed.

Zane left to go check on something downstairs, and Bella came through the door. Emma and Cleo replaced the babies into their crib and went to go sit beside Rikki. The five friends all squashed onto the bed together, sunlight falling in beams on their tranquil faces.

"The calm after a storm," Bella sighed contentedly.

The five friends all sat happily, arms linked and faces happy, for a long time.

Rikki's grumbling stomach broke the peace.

"Me too!" Cleo agreed.

34. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part I

_ August 16th 2019 _

"Hey Lewis!" Cleo said with a smile as she entered his office and gave him a brief peck on the forehead.

"Hi sweetie, what's up?" he asked, glancing up from his research.

"Not muchâ€¦" Cleo said unconvincingly, sitting on the surgical table with her legs double-crossed awkwardly.

He tilted his head questioningly.

"Kim called," Cleo said with an _almost_ imperceptible grimace.

Lewis, knowing his wife all too well, noticed this. "Come on," he laughed, "After all these years you two still can't get along. Grow up!"

"Yeah, I know. Easier said than done," Cleo rolled her eyes.

"Anyway, what'd she want?" Lewis asked, turning back to the computer.

"She's coming to visit next week," Cleo groaned, then her expression changed to one of curiosity, "With Elliott."

At this, Lewis glanced up. "Emma's brother? I thought they broke up ages ago?"

When Cleo and Lewis had married six years back, everyone had been surprised at the new relationship between Cleo and Emma's younger siblings. They were an unlikely pair, but got along well for the

nearly three years that they dated. When Elliott, a doctor, had been transferred to Canada, he and Kim had broken off the relationship. Now, six months after his return to Australia, it appeared that Elliott and Kim might have rekindled the flame.

"I think they might have gotten back together," Cleo said, pursing her lips. She suddenly giggled. "Wouldn't it be funny if they got married? Then Emma and I would be sisters-in-law!"

Lewis raised his eyebrows and grinned. "It could happen!"

oOoOoOoOo

"Ben!" Anna called, coming around the bend to the Marine Reserve, "Lunch!"

Ben, looking weary and worn, clambered down from the scaffolding. There was a lot of repair to be done on the Marine Reserve. The storm had ripped off a good deal of the newly installed exterior cladding and torn free whole sections of the roof. Ben and his building team had been working overtime the past few weeks to get the project back on schedule.

Anna felt sorry for her husband. In spite of the fact that mermaid didn't physically age, Ben was looking older. His eyes were tired and he hadn't shaved in a few days. The crew would often work late into the night repairing the storm's damage. The setback was taking its toll on poor Ben, who looked in desperate need of a break.

"Hey," Anna said, smoothing back his hair and kissing him, "Y'alright?"

"Well," Ben said, "We've made progress. I'm just glad that the windows hadn't been installed yet. I can't imagine the cost of replacing that much broken glass. I think it did quite well to be honest. No big trees fell on it either, which is a relief. But goodness me I'm tired."

He took a large bite of the roast beef sandwich Anna had brought him and sat down on a pile of wooden planks.

"Anna," Ben said, turning to her with a deadly serious expression, "I've made a decision. I want to know what you think about it, but I'm almost certain."

Anna tensed, sensing the firmness in his tone. "Okay?" she said worriedly.

Ben looked about himself nervously to make sure no-one was listening. "I don't want to lose them. I think that's what I'm going to try to lose my mermaid powers."

Anna gasped. "What?" she whispered, white as a sheet.

"I've put a lot of thought into it," Ben said carefully, "And I think it's for the best. It's just too much of a hassle. Particularly now with the marine reserve. And if, at some point in the future, I really feel the need to have them again, I can always just head back to the moon pool."

Anna's expression was ghastly. "Are you sure?" she asked, her voice uneven, "I mean, it's who you are! Who we are."

"I love you so much," Ben said, "But this is just something I need to do. It's different for you and the other girls, and I don't expect you to feel this as keenly as I do. I just want to be normal again and not have to be on my guard constantly."

Anna smiled weakly. "It's your decision. And I fully support you. But how are you going to do it?"

"Full moon tonight!" Ben grinned.

oOoOoOoOo

"Full moon tonight," Bella said in an authoritative tone to her son.

"Yes mama!" Jake answered pleasantly.

"Do you know what that means?" Bella pressed on.

"We have to be careful?" Jake asked, his green eyes wide.

"We sure do, because otherwise we might get moonstruck!" Bella exclaimed, "And that's never good." Bella thought back over all the horrible moonstrike experiences the girls had had over the years. None of the mer-children had been moonstruck, as of yet, and their mothers firmly intended to keep it that way. They were always incredibly careful on full moons, and went through this same lecture every month.

"Mama, what's it like to be moonstruck?" Jake asked curiously.

"Not at all fun," Bella laughed.

Jake's little forehead frowned, wondering what it would be like. He'd quite like to see what it would be like to be moonstruck, he thought. Mummies were always so strict and mean, never letting them do anything. Well, Jake thought, maybe just this once I won't do as I'm told.

oOoOoOoOo

Rikki was curled up on the sofa, trying to catch a few winks of sleep before her boys next awoke. She was half-asleep, dreaming of water. Pretty water, Rikki thought, smiling in her sleep. Not really conscious, Rikki was vaguely aware of a feeling akin to moonstrike, but smiled as she thought about Mako Island.

Harry cooed in his bassinet, rolling over and making panic noises when Rikki wasn't immediately at his side.

Rikki woke up blinking, and realized that the sky was dark. "Shoot!" she said aloud, realizing she'd not made any preparations for the full moon yet.

Ethan had awoken by now, and was fussy as he lay in the other bassinet.

"Shhhh," Rikki comforted her babies, trying awkwardly to balance one in each arm as she walked around the house pulling curtains shut with her teeth. As she finished the last of the preparations and laid the babies back down in their cribs, Rikki breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, Rikki glimpsed a bright, entrancing and chillingly familiar light. A slow, enthralled smile spread across her face.

oOoOoOoOo

"Well," Ben said, "This is it! The last time you'll see your husband as a merman."

Anna sighed and hugged Ben hard. "Be careful out there," she said, "Don't get moonstruck or anything. Andâ€¦ I love you."

They kissed tenderly, and Anna went into the next room as Ben opened the front door and stepped out into the night.

Looking deliberately at the moon to avoid being ambushed by its power, Ben walked along the narrow path to the beach.

oOoOoOoOo

"Will," Bella said, her tone panicked, "Have you seen Jake?"

"No, I thought he was with you?" Will frowned.

"Um, NO!" Bella said, her voice rising anxiously. She had circled the house twice. Danielle was already sleeping quietly in her bed, but Jacob was nowhere to be seen. The doors and windows were thoroughly covered in preparation for the full moon.

"Don't worry, he's probably just at the McCartney's house or something. Why don't you give Cleo a call and ask if he can stay the night. Easier than trying to get between buildings on a night like this."

"Okay," Bella said uncertainly.

The phone rang, almost as if it anticipated her next action, and Bella sprang at it.

"Hello?" she answered.

"Hey Bells, it's Cleo!" the voice was somewhat cheerful, but with a hint of urgency, "Just wondering if Jennie's there? She's not home and I assumed she'd be hanging out with Jake."

"What?" Bella exclaimed, "I thought Jake was with you!"

On the other end of the receiver, Cleo turned pale.

oOoOoOoOo

On a large flat rock near the top of Mako Island, a boy and a girl

sat hand in hand. They stared at the full moon with glazed looks and wide eyes. Slowly, deliberately, matching smiles spread across their young faces as the moon's deceptively calm embrace swallowed their wills into its own.

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Sorry for the delay in updates! School is back in session and I've had very little time to write. I'll try to update whenever I can, but it probably won't be often. Thanks to SparksFly3737, PeacePinkSeddie, onlinegirlgoing4god and Quillcox for your continued reviews! And don't forget, last chance to vote on the poll: who do you want to see more of in this story? Closes tomorrow.**

35. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part II

Ben felt unnaturally at peace with himself as he swam slowly over to Phoenix Island. The full moon, hovering tantalizingly at the horizon, gleamed brightly, almost golden with the lights of the mainland.

He swam cautiously through the narrow opening of the fairy cavern, his tail flicking against a large loose rock and causing it to fall and block his exit.

Ben cursed silently, and tried to push it out of the way, with no success. Oh well, he thought, it's not as if I'll be able to swim back anyway. Then it hit him. How was he going to swim back to Mako without a tail? Ben groaned at his lack of planning. To be honest, he didn't even know if his plan was going to work. It was only an assumption that the Phoenix Island Cave would reverse the effects of the Mako one. Ben began to panic.

Just then, Ben glimpsed the full moon through a gaping hole in the cathedral ceiling. It had now centered over Phoenix Island, beaming cheekily down at the trapped merman.

Suddenly, the water all around Ben began to change. It was not at all like the moon pool on Mako. This water began, not to bubble, but to shine. All around him, the water became bright, shimmery and electric blue as the moon's energy pulsed through the cave. Ben felt a whirlpool begin to form around him, swirling faster and faster as he remained still in the centre of it. Multicolored bullets of water began to shoot up like fireworks from the whirlpool, arching over each other and back flipping back into the swirling water.

Ben's eyes were wide, and he treaded water helplessly as this colourful display raged around him. Looking down at his tail, Ben noticed that it was no longer the fleshy orange that it normally was, but bright, iridescent and all the colours of the rainbow.

The moon laughed down at the fairy cave's frolicking, teasing it jovially as it passed over the island and off across the sky. As it disappeared out Ben's view, the cave immediately calmed to its prior state. Bewildered and exhausted, Ben hauled himself out of the water and collapsed unconscious on the rock.

oOoOoOoOo

"Emmaaaaaa!" a flirtatious voice called from outside the front door of the Doves' house, "Come for a swim!"

Emma froze on the spot. This was not good.

"Rikki?" she called tentatively, "Is that you?"

"Noooo!" Rikki giggled, "It's not Rikki."

Emma's mind was racing as to how to ambush and cure her moonstruck friend. She decided to play along for now. "Who is it then?" Emma called, trying to match the ditziness in Rikki's voice.

"It's Moonrikkii!" she laughed dreamily, "It's so pretttyyyy outside. Come swimming!"

Emma bit her lip. Only too often she had tried to remain sane in the midst of her moonstruck friends and failed miserably. They were always too strong-willed when under the influence of the moon.

Suddenly, as she was thinking, the door flung open and Rikki skipped in.

"Emmaaa!" she squealed delightedly.

Emma's instincts tensed immediately, knowing this would be her downfall. Then, glimpsing the moon beckoning her seductively, Emma succumbed to its power and giggled entrancingly.

"Moon!" she murmured enigmatically.

oOoOoOoOo

Bella and Cleo stared straight at the moon as they walked down the path to the moon pool. They had no doubt that the two moonstruck toddlers would have found their way to the magical cave as quickly as possible.

As they neared the moon pool's entrance, which they had cleverly expanded to accommodate an adult walking height the previous year, Bella and Cleo heard two loud giggles behind them. Cleo dove quickly into the bush, pulling Bella in behind her.

Along the footpath skipped two blond women, their eyes wild and excited, their faces spread wide with matching smiles.

They were singing, one in tune, one definitely not so, and their voices rang out in the still night air.

"_Ooh-ooh-ooh, moon. Ooh-ooh-ooh, moon. Shine, shine, shine bright moon."_

Bella blinked as she watched the two girls approach the moon pool's entrance. They slowed from skipping to a near standstill, and bowed down profoundly in front of the cave.

"Helloooooo moon pool!" They exclaimed simultaneously.

Cleo stifled a giggle and choked audibly.

The two blonds froze. The one on the left, with pale curly hair, suddenly stood up and spun around. Her companion, with tidy straight hair, flicked her head around and stared straight at where Cleo and Bella sat hiding in the bush.

"Cleo! Bella!" the two blonds exclaimed, "Come swimming with us!"

"Shoot!" Bella whispered, her eyes wide, "What do we do?"

In the end, there wasn't much to do. Rikki and Emma grabbed Cleo and Bella and dragged them down the steps to the moon pool.

Cleo and Bella breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief when they saw Jake and Jennie, grinning manically, swimming in the moon pool's waters. Then, before they even realized it, they had joined their children in the water, having been flung into the pool by Emma and Rikki. The two blonds dove in after them, quickly transforming. They, like Jake and Jennie, stared through the volcano's mouth to the moon above, faces delighted.

Cleo and Bella groaned as they realized the difficulty of dealing with four moonstruck mermaids.

The moon laughed hysterically from above, watching the mayhem it was wreaking on the little island. Then, its heart becoming sympathetically for poor Bella (for whom the moon had always had a soft spot) and her friends, it relented and moved on to play elsewhere.

oOoOoOoOo

The next morning

"Oww," Emma moaned, rubbing her head gingerly. Her eyes refused to open at first, and her spine creaked in protest as she tried to sit up. Her bed, she thought, was unusually uncomfortable this morning. Beside her, she heard movement.

"Ash," she muttered, "I think I'll sleep in today, 'kay?"

"What?" Rikki asked, blinking dazedly and not really opening her eyes at all as she attempted to prop herself up.

"Rikki?" Emma asked confusedly, "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Rikki shot back, wishing more than anything in the world for a hot cup of coffee. Her neck ached dully and her head throbbed.

"Well good morning idiots," someone laughed at them.

Emma finally made her eyelids work, and peered out from under them. "Cleo?" she frowned, "Where are we?"

"Moon pool. Someoneâ€¦" Cleo said, eyes darting between the pair, "Got a tad moonstruck last night."

"I think she means us," Rikki whispered to Emma.

"And Jake and Jennie too, just for fun," Bella added, coming down the steps to the moon pool. She handed Rikki a mug and Emma a glass, and the two sighed contentedly as they discovered, respectively, the coffee and orange juice.

"Ohâ€|" Emma groaned, a vague picture of last night's events coming back to her.

"Where are Jakifer and Jennob now?" Rikki asked, then frowned as she heard herself.

"At home, asleep, alive, thank goodness," Bella laughed.

At that moment, a clatter of footsteps rushed down into the moon pool and Anna appeared looking anxious and flustered. "Ben didn't come home last night," she exclaimed.

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Thank you so much for the reviews! I love hearing your feedback. The poll has closed, and we'll be seeing more of the mermaid children, and other relatives, in future chapters. This chapter's ending is especially dedicated to onlinegirlgoing4god, because I know how much you just LOVE cliffhangers. K**

36. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part III

"Oh my Lord, Ben, thank goodness!" Anna exclaimed wildly as she surfaced in the cavern on Phoenix Island.

Her husband was sitting cross-legged on a rock, frowning intently at the water which Anna now pulled herself out of.

"Honey, are you okay?" Anna asked him frantically as she waited for her tail to dry, "What happened last night? Why didn't you come home? Are you alright?"

Ben turned his gaze slowly from the water to Anna. His eyes were vacant and distant and he studied her curiously.

"Who are you?" Ben asked quietly.

oOoOoOoOo

Rikki just loved watching them.

She sat peacefully on her bed, drinking in everything about her little boys, who lay wriggling on a blanket at the head of the bed. Zane had cleverly suggested dressing them as dissimilarly as possible, so as to avoid a recurrence of their first few days of life, when it was quite possible that the two boys had swapped names several dozen times.

Harry wore a deep blue onesie decorated with dancing elephants; Ethan a creamy yellow of the same style with brown bears. They gurgled happily, opening and closing their tiny hands playfully.

Rikki suddenly became aware of a breeze tousling her hair. _That's

odd, _ she thought, and looked behind her to find the source of the air flow.

"Oh my gosh!" Rikki yelled, as she noticed that the wall behind her was gone. A puddle of water remained on the ground behind the bed.

Rikki blinked, trying to figure out what on earth was happening. Then it came to her. She turned back around and looked at her boys. Rikki pursed her lips.

"Okay dudes," she said with a groan, "In this household we have some rules. First and foremost, no using your powers to _melt _the house."

Harry and Ethan cooed obliviously.

oOoOoOoOo

"Hey Rikki, what's up?" Ash said uncertainly, as the blond barged through his front door. She had a baby boy in each arm and an annoyed expression on her face.

"Emma around?" Rikki snipped.

"She's taking a nap at the moment- still exhausted from being moonstruck," Ash laughed.

"Bedroom?" Rikki asked.

"Well, yes, but really I think it would be better to let her rest," Ash tried to stop Rikki as she trotted down the hallway.

Rikki wheeled around and stared at Ash, her hair flying in all directions. "Ash," she said quietly, scathingly, "My house has been _melted_. I'm exhausted. Bella's at work, Anna and Ben are goodness knows where, and I need someone to re-freeze my bedroom wall so that I'm not sleeping in the middle of a forest. I'm sorry if that interrupts your wife's grandma-nap, but deal with it!"

Ash, too stunned to speak, gestured toward the door, and walked back towards the kitchen. Still carrying her twins, Rikki used her foot to open the door knob and entered without knocking.

Rikki's dramatic entrance pierced the quiet air of Emma's immaculate bedroom. Emma stirred in her sleep and slowly woke.

Rikki grimaced at Emma's ashen face, and immediately felt guilty for waking her so selfishly.

"Y'okay Em?" Rikki asked, her tone softening.

"Oh, Rikki," Emma said confusedly, "Hey! Whatcha up to? Why are you in my bedroomâ€|?"

"The boys melted my bedroom," Rikki said sheepishly, "And I was wondering if you could re-freeze it for me?"

"Ohâ€| okay?" Emma raised an eyebrow. She swung her legs out of bed and stood up. Immediately, she put her hand to her forehead as the

world swayed in front of her.

"Are you alright?" Rikki asked concernedly, frowning at Emma's distant expression.

"Yeah," Emma said unconvincingly, "Just headrush I think." She forced a smile and headed off in the direction of Rikki's house.

oOoOoOoOo

"Okay, Ben," the girl said quietly, "It's not funny anymore. Come on. You know who I am! I'm your wife for goodness sake!"

Ben frowned, trying to remember the face, which did seem vaguely familiar. He knew the hair, certainly. Red hair.

Ben blinked. The woman had a tail. That wasn't normal, Ben thought. It also wasn't normal that she thought she was his wife. He must be dreaming, Ben decided, and this strange, red-headed, tail-woman was just a figment of his imagination. That was the only possible explanation.

He wasn't too sure how he'd gotten here, either. It was a strange place, with blue crystal everywhere. Ben had never seen anything like it before. It was all just too odd. Then again, Ben thought, dreams are like that.

"Ben," the tail-woman's voice was tinged with anxiety, "Come on! Iâ€| " she faltered, her breathing sharp and shallow.

"Are you okay, miss?" Ben asked, slightly worried about the tail-woman. She didn't look well at all. He got up off the rock and walked towards the water. Wow, the water was really shimmering, Ben thought, his eyes widening. It seemed familiar too. Ben watched it for a while, noticing some faint rainbow hues dancing amidst the blue.

"Ben!" The voice snapped him out of his trance. "Alright sweetie," the tail-woman said quietly, "I think we should go home now."

She extended her hand, and Ben hesitated. He wasn't sure whether or not to trust this strange girl. But then again, he thought, since this was a dream, it didn't really matter. He accepted her hand and let her pull him into the water.

The tail-woman waited for a moment after Ben landed in the pool, as if she was expecting something to happen. Nothing did.

She nodded, her expression somewhere between sadness and relief.

"Hold on to my hand," she said, and swam out of the cave and back to Mako Island.

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Hi everyone! Sorry it's been so very very long. I haven't had any time to write lately! School is swamping me, as well as a mountain of extracurriculars, but yesterday was the big choir

competition, so now that that's over I might have a bit more time. Thanks for continuing to read and review in spite of the gap- I really appreciate it! I will try to keep updating at least (once a week/fortnight/ month/ year/ century?), so please bear with me. Many thanks! Kate x**

37. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part IV

"And forward," Lewis said in an authoritative tone.

Ben obliged, and looked straight ahead as Lewis examined his eyes. Anna sat in the desk chair, her legs folded under her. Her morning sickness was beginning to extend into the afternoon, and she tried to keep composed as she sat in Lewis' office, waiting for the diagnosis on her husband.

Lewis sighed, and shook his head. "Induced amnesia," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "I don't think there's anything more to it. Probably from a rough blow to the head, but there's no signs of external damage. Take him home, let him rest. Hopefully it'll wear off after a good night's sleep. If you notice any signs of bruising or concussion, let me know."

Anna smiled gratefully

"So you're a doctor," Ben said curiously.

"Yes," Lewis replied, half laughing at Ben's newfound ignorance.

"I want to be a doctor when I grow up," Ben said cheerfully.

Anna giggled involuntarily. "When you grow up? Ben, honey, how old do you think you are?"

Ben frowned decisively. "Fifteen. Why?"

Lewis' and Anna's eyes widened.

oOoOoOoOo

"There we go," Emma said with a sigh, "A wall."

"Thanks Em," Rikki said, now feeling terrible for making Emma get up. Emma really didn't look well. Her face was now verging on a shade of gray, and her eyes were ringed with purple.

"No problem," Emma said, smiling unconvincingly. Rikki could tell that she was in pain.

"What's wrong?" Rikki said frankly.

"Nothing, truly," Emma said, "I'm just tired, that's all."

Rikki raised an eyebrow.

"_Truly_," Emma insisted.

oOoOoOoOo

By the time Bella got home from work, Will had put the kids to bed after a very early dinner.

She opened the door to the nursery quietly and cautiously, being very careful not to wake Jake. She was still furious at him for disobeying her and getting moonstruck, but she couldn't help loving him. Bella crept over to Jacob's bed and sat down beside it.

The blond little boy stirred in his sleep and looked up at his mother. _Darn he was cute,_ thought Bella, _how am I meant to stay mad at him when he's that adorable?_

"Mama?" Jake asked tentatively.

"Yeah sweetie," Bella relented.

"I'm sorry."

oOoOoOoOo

A few days later (August 21st 2019)

"Lewis! I'm off. I'm gonna take the boat. See you in a little bit," Cleo called as she swung her purse over her shoulder.

"Be nice!" came the reply from Lewis' office.

"What are you talking about?" Cleo scoffed, "I'm always nice to Kim! _Always_!"

"You know what I mean," Lewis said, poking his head around the door.

Cleo rolled her eyes in exasperation. "I'll try," she grumbled.

Lewis gave her a quick peck on the lips before disappearing back into the lab.

Cleo exhaled and made a mental note that she _would_ be nice to Kim.

"Em?" Cleo called, "You ready to go?" Emma and Cleo were going to pick up Kim and Elliott from the airport, which Emma was looking forward to much more than Cleo.

"Em?" Cleo called again. She frowned. Emma was usually so prompt. Cleo checked her watch again. They really needed to get going. Cleo pushed open the Dove's front door.

"Emma!€|" Cleo said, walking down the hallway. In the living room, Eric and Lucy sat playing with some building blocks.

"Auntie Cleo!" Eric said happily.

"Hey buddy!" Cleo said playfully, "Where's your mama?"

"See's in her bedwoom," Eric lisped, "See's sick."

Cleo walked down the hallway and into Emma's room. She was covered in blankets, but Cleo could still notice her shivering.

"Emma, honey," Cleo said softly, "Are you okay?"

"Just a bit of a fever," Emma rasped, "Don't worry about it!"

"Well, I'm gonna go pick up Kim and Elliott from the airport now," Cleo said, unconvinced.

"Oh no!" Emma exclaimed, "I completely forgot! Oh Cleo, I'm so sorry."

"It's fine Em, get some rest. I'll see you in a little bit."

As Cleo left she poked her head into Lewis' office again.

"Hon, can you go make sure Emma's okay? She's in a pretty bad way."

"Will do!" Lewis called back absentmindedly.

oOoOoOoOo

"Anna?" Ben called. He had been making progress in the past few days, mostly because he had no choice. Everyone was telling him his whole life.

"Hi Ben," Anna smiled tiredly, "What's up?"

"I'm starting to remember," Ben smiled.

oOoOoOoOo

Planes made Cleo nervous, even if she wasn't on them. As the flight from Sydney touched down on the tarmac, Cleo breathed a sigh of relief. She closed her eyes and tried to reassure herself one last time that she would get along with Kim. She would, she would, she w-

"Cleo!" A voice called.

Cleo gritted her teeth and opened her eyes. "Kim!" she said pleasantly. Cleo walked over and hugged her sister, who, though shorter than Cleo, had gained a few inches by the tall orange stilettos she wore.

Kim pulled back and looked Cleo up and down with a scrutinizing glance. "Still embracing the jeans and t-shirt approach, I see," Kim noted. Kim worked in fashion and was forever disdainful of her elder sister's comfortable style.

"Still embracing the lack of tact approach, I see," Cleo shot back. No, Cleo chided herself, I'm going to be nice.

A tall and handsome young man came up behind Kim and smiled warmly at Cleo.

"Elliott!" Cleo grinned, "How are you?" They hugged. "Here, let me take your bags," Cleo offered politely.

"What a lovely pack mule you are!" Kim laughed snidely.

Cleo smiled, but internally she was fuming.

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Wow, look at me go! Two chapters in one day? Thanks to _Krystalslazz_ for your prompt review of the last one... and no I'm not telling you what'll happen next! Kate x**

38. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part V

The sea was calm and the sky radiant with the pinks and oranges of the setting sun. The little speedboat sliced through the silky water as it sprinted towards Mako Island. Kim and Elliot sat holding hands in the back seat of the boat, talking quietly amid themselves. Cleo was still annoyed at her sister, but was doing her best to hide it, for Elliot's sake at least. They had gone to a caf   for afternoon tea, and the silence between the sisters was deafening. Elliott had done his best to make polite chatter, as he continued to do throughout the boat ride.

"So Cleo," Elliot began, "How are Jennie and Max? Grown up much since I last saw them?"

"Ridiculously so," Cleo laughed, "Jennie's quite the little madam-she's so artistic and just loves everything and everyone in the world. Max is such an easy-going little guy- you'll love him."

"And Lewis?"

"Weird as ever!" Cleo said jokingly, "No, he's great. You know he trained as doctor last year? You two will have a lot to talk about, I reckon."

As the boat pulled up to the dock, Cleo could tell that something was wrong. A strange atmosphere hung like an invisible storm cloud over Mako Island. As Cleo helped her sister out of the boat she saw a figure come running down the path.

"Hey Bella!" Cleo said curiously, "What's going on?"

Bella looked odd. Her face was pale and her brow furrowed. She gave Cleo a glance that said a thousand words, and then turned with a smile to Kim and Elliott.

"Hey you guys, it's really nice to see you again, but I'm afraid you've caught us in a bit of a crisis," Bella said smoothly, "Would it be too awful to book you a hotel room on the mainland, just for tonight, until things have settled down here?"

Kim and Elliott exchanged a glance and shrugged. "That would be fine," Elliott said kindly, "We don't want to intrude."

"Thank you so much, I'm so sorry about this," Bella said apologetically, "Will's gonna take the boat over there now."

As she spoke, Cleo noticed for the first time that Will was standing

behind Bella, holding Danielle in one arm and a duffle bag in the other.

Cleo and Bella waved as the boat pulled out of sight, smiling until it disappeared behind the trees.

"Okay, Bella, what's going on? I'm kind of freaking out," Cleo said anxiously.

"I think you should come with me," Bella said solemnly.

oOoOoOoOo

A few hours earlier

Lewis sat at his desk, engrossed in his work and not really paying attention to the time. Lewis' stomach rumbled. He was uncertain whether or not to heed his hunger or ignore it, because he really couldn't be bothered making any food_. _

Quite the dilemma, thought Lewis. _Dilemma? Emma! Oh shoot._

Lewis remembered Cleo's earlier request to go check on Emma with a start. He felt bad, and closed his laptop quickly.

The door to the Doves' house was open- Cleo had obviously forgotten to shut it on her way out. The baby was crying, Lewis noted with chagrin. Emma was normally very quick to attend to her children's needs.

"Emma, it's Lewis," he called tentatively- he didn't want to wake her.

"Lewis?" a hoarse voice called from the bathroom.

Lewis opened the bathroom door cautiously and jumped a little at the sight that met him.

"Oh my," he gulped.

oOoOoOoOo

Bella's pace was unnaturally quick, and Cleo struggled to keep up as she cantered down the path to the mermaid village.

"Bella, talk to me, what is going on?" Cleo pleaded.

They had stopped at the front door to the Doves' house. Cleo frowned, remembering how sick Emma had been this morning.

"Justâ€¦|" Bella began, "Prepare yourself."

All the preparation in the world couldn't have readied Cleo for the sight that met her as she entered the lovely little cottage. The furniture in the living room had all been pushed aside to make room for Lewis' patient table, and there, surrounded by drips and machines, lay Emma. Or at least Cleo assumed it was Emma, for the creature was unrecognizable.

Her hair was gone. That was what struck Cleo the most. But upon closer inspection, Emma's appearance worsened. Her skin was pasty, drained of all healthy colour but consumed by a strange blue-gray tinge. She was in mermaid form, her tail no longer the pretty orange it normally was but charcoal gray.

As Cleo drew closer, Emma opened her eyes. Cleo gasped. Her irises had vanished completely, leaving only little black pupils encircled by white.

Emma's breathing was unnatural, ragged and harsh, but she tried to speak to Cleo. Her words were unrecognizable, but Cleo appreciated the effort and reached out to hold her friend's hand.

It was all too much.

"Where the heck is Lewis?" Cleo muttered in a low tone to Bella, "Why isn't he here, doing something?"

Bella inhaled sharply. "Well, that's just it," she said, her voice squeaky, "It's not just Emma. Jennifer and Jacobâ€|" Bella broke off, her eyes filling with tears.

"What?" Cleo asked, mortified.

"Lewis can't figure it out," Bella whispered, "It's not any human disease. He- he doesn't know what to do."

A tight lump had formed in Cleo's throat and she swallowed repeatedly in an attempt to dislodge it. Her brain was racing. Then she thought of it.

"Have you called Lucky?"

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Hey all! Sorry it's been a bit grim and dark lately, I promise you all (well most) future storylines will be happy happy happy from now on. I'm halfway through the next chapter and it should be up within the hour, so hold on tight! Who's loving my cliffhangers? Kate x**

39. Episode Seven, Moon Fever: Part VI

Two days later (August 23rd 2019)

Bella sat cradling her son's head in her lap, stroking the soft skin where his golden locks used to be. The fever had broken, thanks to Lucky's advice, and Jake was sleeping soundly.

Bella was exhausted. She hadn't slept in 48 hours, and was verging on delirium. Laying Jake's sweet bald head on his pillow, Bella crept out of the room and over to the main building.

Ash and Cleo sat in the armchairs, occasionally making conversation, but generally just trying to keep their eyes open. The three of them, plus Lewis, were the only healthy people on the island. At the first sign of trouble, the Bennetts had quickly evacuated with their two sets of twins, and were staying at their mainland house until the

crisis had been averted. Will, Anna and Ben had taken all the other children, including the Doves, out of the danger zone too.

Bella shivered and wrapped her sweater tighter around her. The island had been eerily quiet for the past few days, and Bella didn't like it one bit.

Lewis came in the door and collapsed on the sofa.

Cleo looked over at him sympathetically. "You okay, hon?" she asked.

"Exhausted," came the slurred reply, "But the worst is over."

"How's Emma?" Ash asked anxiously.

"The fever's broken, and she's asleep. Poor dear," Lewis shook his head.

Emma, Jacob and Jennifer had all contracted varying degrees of a magical condition called Moon Fever. Usually confined to werewolves, the disease originated from a particularly potent moon (such as the one the previous week), and preyed upon moonstruck mermaids. Rikki, goodness knew how, had escaped the disease despite being moonstruck, but Jacob, Jennifer and Emma had all succumbed to it.

Jennie fared best. She managed to keep all of her hair, and her fever had broken in the first twenty-four hours. She had been asleep almost ever since, waking only to take meals and be petted by her anxious mother.

Jake and Emma had both been hit hard. Jake was discovered in a similar condition to Emma- pale, gray and iris-less- but had responded quickly to the cures that Lucky had prescribed. Emma, on the other hand, was so far gone by the time the medicine reached her that had they left it any longer, Lucky had said, she surely would have died of the fever.

Now all three patients were out of harm's way, but still suffering terribly.

"Okay," Cleo said, "New plan. We're going to build a bomb shelter underground. And once a month when the moon is full, we'll all hide in there till morning. Ooh! And it can have a kitchen and a television andâ€¦".

Bella tipped her head and looked at Cleo with a raised eyebrow.

"Okayâ€¦" Cleo said, "Maybe that's not realistic."

oOoOoOoOo

August 25th

All was well. Mostly.

The mermaids had returned to the island, along with Kim and Elliott, who, upon their arrival, announced that they were getting married in

November.

Later that afternoon, as Cleo relayed the news to the bed-bound Emma, she couldn't stop laughing.

"Your poor, poor brother," Cleo said, her eyes watering from laughter.

Emma smiled, her eyes sparkling with happiness. Cleo was glad that Emma had irises again- she was kinda creepy without them.

"She's not that bad Cleo," Emma giggled, "It's only with you that she's horrible. Kim's actually quite a nice person. And I love her shoes!"

"I am alone in this world!" Cleo groaned.

After she left, Emma leaned back against the pillows and closed her eyes. The door opened again and Emma sighed.

"Cleo, be a big girl and go talk to your sister," she said matter-of-factly.

"It's me," Ash laughed.

"Oh!" Emma opened her eyes, "Hey. Sorry."

Ash came and sat beside her on the bed. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I was thinking," Ash said cheerfully, "That we should use those tickets to Paris. Once you're well, of course. But I remembered that we missed our anniversary while you were ill."

Emma sat up suddenly, pondering his words. "Oh. Whoopsie-daisy! But Paris would be nice! Oh Ash, that would be wonderful!"

"Next month?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes!" Emma replied gleefully.

oOoOoOoOo

Anna and Ben strolled along the boardwalk eating ice cream. The sun danced off her auburn hair and made the water glisten prettily.

"It's all so vague," Ben said, "Like an old dream or something. But I know it must be real."

"Don't you doubt it," Anna said cheekily, "I didn't marry you for nothing."

"It would be kind of cool to be a merman," Ben said pensively, "I wonder what it's like."

Anna stopped abruptly. "Oh no you don't!" she said seriously, "No changing your mind now. You are staying human, mister. No more causing me trouble."

Ben wrinkled his nose. "I don't really remember how it felt. To swim so fast, to move water with my hand movementsâ€¦. I've forgotten. I miss it."

Anna groaned and gestured her surrender. "Fine!" she said huffily, "If you want to be a merman, you can be a merman. See if I care." She stuck her tongue out cheekily and continued walking down the boardwalk, her pregnant belly bouncing in time with her steps.

Ben, rather pleased with himself, followed her.

oOoOoOoOo

Jake snuck into Jennie's room just before dinner, and woke her up with a grin.

Jennie, who hadn't seen her best friend since they contracted Moon Fever, laughed aloud at his new appearance.

"You don't have hair!" she giggled, and reached out a hand to pat his bald head.

"Hey!" Jake protested, "Don't be mean. My mummy says I look hann-sum."

"I didn't say you look silly," Jenny said kindly, "I think you look hann-sum too."

Jake decided to forgive her, and gave her a big wet kiss on the forehead to prove it. And it was at that moment, age four and a half and incredibly bald, that Jake decided he would marry Jennie some day.

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note: See, what did I tell you? Happy!****

40. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part I

September 18th 2019

"Ash? Honey?" Emma called from the front door, "Come on, we're going to be late! The plane leaves in, like, five hours!"

In the bedroom, Ash kept quiet, hoping she wouldn't notice he was there. He stared at his duffle bag, which was only half-full and in complete disarray. In his head, Ash cursed silently. _Why? Why must I insist on procrastinating?_ Ash chided himself, _And why, oh why, did I refuse Em's offer to pack for me?_

"Ash?" Emma's voice was getting closer. Ash frowned and quickly tossed the last of his clothes messily into the suitcase and zipped it up just as Emma walked through the door.

She stopped dead in her tracks and stared, incredulous.

"Have you not packed yet?" Emma voice was falsely jovial, but with a strong tinge of poison undertone.

Ash bit his lip sheepishly and shifted from foot to foot.

"Ash. Dove. Seriously?" Emma's eyes shot flames.

"Umâ€¦" Ash slung the bag over his shoulder and grabbed his travel documents from the night stand, "Erâ€¦ I love you?"

Ash planted a kiss on Emma's cheek questioningly. She suppressed an unwanted grin.

"Whatever," Emma snorted, "Love you too. Let's go."

oOoOoOoOo

Dinner that evening was somewhat quieter than usual with the Doves missing. While Emma and Ash were in Paris, their children were staying with Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert, their ever-doting grandparents.

After the dishes were cleared and the young ones put to bed, Cleo beckoned Bella with a playful finger.

"Come with me," Cleo giggled, and pulled Bella outside. They reached the door to the McCartney's house, which Cleo opened quietly so as to not wake Max and Jennifer. She dragged Bella into the kitchen and pointed.

"Look!" Cleo exclaimed gleefully.

"It'sâ€¦ aâ€¦ fish tank," Bella noted unenthusiastically, "Wow."

And indeed, on the countertop, resplendently festooned with a bright coral interior, sat a fish tank. Inside were two fish- one bright blue, the other startlingly red.

Bella raised her eyebrows.

Cleo's shoulders drooped, disappointed. "Thanks for that. I can just feel the sincerity oozing out of every word," she said, wrinkling her nose, "I knew I should've shown Rikki or Anna."

"No, no," Bella fumbled, trying hopelessly to get excited about it, "I _love_ the fish tank. What are their names?"

"Umâ€¦" Cleo began, "I'm not sure I want to tell you."

"Why not?" Bella asked in an injured tone.

"Well, Jennie named themâ€¦" Cleo said, gritting her teeth, "Keep in mind that she's, what, like, four and a halfâ€¦"

"Just tell me!" Bella laughed.

"Romeoâ€¦" Cleo grimaced, "And Juice."

Bella frowned. "I know I'm not, like, an expert on Shakespeare, but isn't it Romeo and Juliet?"

Cleo's shrugged. "Don't even get me started."

oOoOoOoOo

"Rikki?" Zane called out, rather too loudly, considering the two infants were _finally_ both asleep.

Rikki came into Leila and Charlie's room with her hands on her hips. "This better be good," she snipped.

"We've, uh, had a bit of an accident," Zane said sheepishly.

Rikki cocked an eyebrow. "Of what nature?"

"The girls decided it would beâ€¦ funnyâ€¦ to pee in their duvets," Zane said, grimacing.

"I see," Rikki said matter-of-factly, "And where are the little monsters now?"

"I'm running them a bath."

"And what did you want from me?"

"Can you go up to the guest bedroom in the main house to get spare sheets?" Zane asked with pleading eyes.

"Fiiine," Rikki grumbled, "Those little turkeys better be clean by the time I get back."

Rikki flounced across the courtyard, glad of the non-pregnant agility, and up the stairs of the main house. She flung open the guest room door and made a beeline for the linen closet, nearly tripping over Anna along the way.

"Anna!" Rikki exclaimed in astonishment, "What are you doing up here?"

Anna was sitting on the floor, wrapped in a fleece blanket and holding a well-worn copy of _Northanger Abbey_. She flushed as Rikki addressed her, and had clearly not been expecting to be discovered.

"I'mâ€¦ uhâ€¦" Anna fumbled for an excuse, "Oh, who am I kidding. I'm hiding."

Rikki giggled. "I don't blame you in the least. I used to do that all the time when I was pregnant." Forgetting about the sheets she was meant to be grabbing, Rikki plopped herself down beside Anna and pulled part of the blanket around herself. Once comfortable, she looked pointedly at her companion.

Anna sighed. "It's just that ever since Ben got his memory back, he's been soâ€¦ nice. It's frustrating. It's always, 'Oh, Anna, do you need anything?' and 'Are you having any issues with stretch marks?' andâ€¦ ughâ€¦ he's just veryâ€¦ attentive. It's frustrating, and all I want to do is yell and cry- stupid hormones- so I just escape whenever I can. I don't think he minds to be honest. I'm not exactly the nicest person to be around at the moment."

Rikki rolled her eyes. "You, my dear Anna, are an absolute _saint_

compared to what I was like when pregnant. I don't know how you do it. Especially with Thomas being so young! Don't beat yourself up. It's good to have some alone time."

"I like it up here," Anna mused, "It's so peaceful. And it's especially nice to have a bathroom that doesn't have boats and ducks to constantly trip over on your way to the loo."

Rikki snorted. "One of the many joys of motherhood."

"But I wouldn't trade," Anna smiled, "Not for anything in the world. I love my little darlings."

Rikki suddenly recollected her own little darlings and sprang up to get some sheets.

"Peeing in the duvet?" Anna guessed.

"How did you know?" Rikki moaned.

"Been there, done that."

oOoOoOoOo

It was well after midnight by the time Emma and Ash arrived at their hotel. Moonlight poured into the luxurious suite as Emma collapsed on the chaise lounge.

"I'm exhausted," she murmured, and curled up with a pillow.

Ash thanked the bellboy and carried their bags over to the chest. He looked out the window and sighed contentedly. Sacraur Basilica was lit up on the hill, gleaming beautifully in the night.

Ash glanced back towards his beautiful wife, slightly illuminated by the moonlight. Her crisp travel suite was now slightly crinkled from nearly twenty-four hours of traveling, and her always-perfect blond hair was mussed as she hugged the pillow. Ash laughed quietly to himself. He liked it when she wasn't perfect. It made him feel like she actually was his.

He crept slowly over to the chaise lounge and replaced the pillow with himself in her arms. Emma looked up at him sleepily, a dazed smile creeping across her face.

"I love you," Ash murmured, kissing her tenderly, "Happy Anniversary."

"Love you too," Emma replied sleepily, and let him sweep her up in his arms as if she weighed nothing more than a feather. Ash lay her down on the bed and smoothed her hair lovingly. Emma shifted in her sleep, but never let go of his hand, their fingers intertwined.

oOoOoOoOo

****Hi!** Who remembers me? Goodness me, it's been a while, has it not? Every time I update I feel the need to apologise for the delay and yet you're getting an update! What more could one ask for? No, I am sorry for neglecting this story, but between my fourth cold of the

winter, a trip to the lovely Samoa, three enormous research projects and a love affair with Mansfield Park (Have you read Mansfield Park?â€| you must!) I tend to forget about it. Ah well, c'est la vie! Hope you enjoy. Thanks for reading and reviewing! Kate x**

41. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part II

As dawn rose on the island, Will crept down the hallway, tiptoeing as he tried not to wake his wife or children. As he edged past the nursery door, he stopped and frowned.

"Hey sweetie," Bella smiled, evidently wide awake and tending to their children already. She laughed at his chagrin. "What, you actually thought you'd beat me?"

Will wrinkled his nose and continued his voyage into the kitchen for coffee.

It was to be a shared breakfast this morning, and was Rikki's turn to cook. He needed all the sustenance he could find.

"Will, I think it might be time to buy some of those 'I dressed myself today' stickers for Danielle," Bella called from the next room.

"What?" Will laughed, coming back down the hallway, "Oh! I see."

"I let her choose today," Bella fumbled to justify her parenting.

Danielle wore pink knee-high socks with green flip-flops, overalls, a yellow raincoat, sunglasses and a tiara. She grinned from ear to ear and went to hug her daddy's leg.

"One of the perks of living on an island?" Will suggested.

oOoOoOoOo

"Bonjour monsieur," a warm voice murmured in Ash's ear. He rolled over sleepily and smiled at his wife.

"Morning Em."

She was perched cross-legged on the bed, already fully dressed and holding her handbag on her lap.

Ash frowned. "What time is it?"

"Quarter past two," Emma replied cheerfully.

"In the afternoon?" Ash said in a tone of sleepy bewilderment.

"Yup!" Emma laughed, "I'm thinking the Louvre today- they've got this tantalizing Monet exhibit on at the moment, and I couldn't bear to miss it.

What do you think? Ash?"

"Ash!"

He had drifted off again; only to be woken again as Emma threw a pillow at his head.

oOoOoOoOo

Cleo found Max perched precariously atop a bar stool, peering over the edge of the fish tank in awe.

"Mama, how do fish talk?" he asked curiously.

Cleo frowned and ruffled her son's hair.

"Well, they don't really, silly billy! They're fish!"

Behind her, Jenny huffed. "But we're fish too, Mama. We talk."

"We're not fish, love, we're mermaids. There is a difference," Cleo said, silently adding to herself '_though some think we're no better than fish._'

"But Romeo and Juice DO talk!" Max chanted, "Do do do.."

Cleo laughed somewhat warily. Her children did say some crazy things, but they had a habit of being more accurate than they or she knew.

In the tank, Romeo swished his scarlet tail around quickly and pulled up close to the glass. Cleo stared intently at the little betta, cocking her head slightly as he stared back.

Cleo shook her head, fairly certain she was going mad. "Alrightio, troops, breakfast time. Let's go see what Aunty Rikki's managed to burn!"

oOoOoOoOo

It happened to be omelets.

As Cleo swung into her seat, she was met with a sheepish grin and a charred platter of eggs from Rikki.

"At least I try," Rikki huffed, and flounced back to the kitchen in an attempt to salvage the rest of the omelets.

Bella was engrossed in the morning paper, her brow wrinkled in concentration. Across the table, her husband absentmindedly swirled his ruined breakfast around the plate, making a mental note to eat at home tomorrow morning.

"You know who I miss?" Anna began, hormones causing her eyes to water.

"Who's that?"

"Christie," Anna said frowning, "She never came back in the July holidays like she was going to. The kids have been asking about her."

I guess she's forgotten about us."

Cleo pursed her lips at her friend's melodrama. "Don't be silly! She's young, she's got other commitments. She probably doesn't have time for old married people like us."

Anna's tears welled over. "I ****am**** getting old, aren't I? And I haven't even been skydiving yet. I'm always too pregnant."

Bella choked suddenly, spraying a fine orange mist of juice across the table.

Anna relented, realizing how hormonal she was acting. "Still, there's no need to be so rude, Bella!"

"It's not you." Bella had turned white. "Look."

Cleo, Rikki and Anna scrambled to look over Bella's shoulder at the paper. Their expressions fell in shock.

In all its full-page glory, a photo of a mermaid jumped out from the paper.

"Speak of the devil," Anna breathed.

****Author's Note:** Oh my goodness. It hasn't really been three full months, has it? It has!? Oh dear, I am sorry! I've a multitude of excuses, should you wish to hear them, but I think you probably don't want to- are you mad at me for neglecting you for a quarter of a year? Or for, when I did finally return, giving you a very short, badly written chapter ending in a cliffhanger with no promise that I'll be able to write again until early December? Why on earth would you be mad at me for that!? :-p******

****I** do thank you all for your continued support- you've kept me accountable by continuing to read and review! I'd really like to write more on this soon, because I'm bursting with ideas, but final exams are less than a month away, I have auditions for the school musical this week, as well as leadership selection and a billion other things. Plus Downton Abbey (!) Has anyone else been watching Season Three?******

****Now** I'm realising that the Author's Note is becoming longer than the actual chapter, so I'll leave you now, my poor neglected readers, in the vain hope that my brief reappearance has made you not hate me quite so ardently as you might otherwise. :-)******

****Kate x****

42. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part III

"Well, I must say, darling, that was simply fascinating," Ash mocked his wife, "I had no idea there were so many different ways to paint a lake."

Emma rolled her eyes. "You men can never appreciate the beauty of art."

"Just the beauty of you," Ash said, reaching out to hold her hand.

Emma blushed, feeling like his teenage girl instead of his 30-year-old wife.

Emma turned her cell phone back on as they came out of the museum onto the Paris streets. She frowned. 13 missed calls?

Her heart sunk and leapt into her throat simultaneously.

Emma's head blurred in a frenzy of possible scenarios. Her dad had had a heart attack. Lucy had electrocuted herself. Eric had fallen down the stairs and broken his neck. Arianna contracted SIDS and died in her cot. Her mom had drowned. Mako Island had burned down. Australia had been bombed. The world had been bombed. She herself was dead and it was God on the phone trying to notify her of this fact.

Emma didn't realize she was hyperventilating until Ash shook her shoulders and told her to calm down. Emma nodded dazedly and quickly sat on a bench to avoid fainting.

She squeezed her eyes tightly together and said a quick prayer, before pressing the play button on the voicemail.

"It's Cleo," she whispered to Ash as her friend's voice chirped in her ear.

Ash watched her face first relax, then tense, turn ashen and crease into an anxious frown.

Emma put down the phone, her stomach churning.

"What happened?" Ash croaked worriedly.

Emma cleared her throat. "You remember Christie, right?"

oOoOoOoOo

Bella paced.

Anna cried.

Rikki was furious.

"I knew she'd be the ruin of us all!" she huffed angrily, standing with her hands planted firmly on her hips, "I just knew she'd mess up and take us down with her."

Bella stopped and looked at Rikki in disbelief. "Stop it," she said softly, "Sure, she's made a mistake, but it wasn't intentional! Don't you remember what you were like when we were Christie's age? Can't you remember the dozens of times when you, when any one of us, was on the brink of revealing our secret to the whole world? She was the unlucky one, but it wasn't her choice!"

"Yes, but Bella!" Rikki cried.

"No, Rikki. She's alone and scared, and nothing has even happened to us. Stop being so selfish and have a heart."

Rikki sucked in a breath at that last comment. She sat back down and folded her arms tightly across her chest.

Cleo came back in from the other room, still holding the newspaper. "Emma's not picking up. I don't blame her, but still."

She spread the paper across the dining table and read it for the first time.

MYTHS PROVEN: MERMAID CAPTURED, the headline blared.

Underneath it, in all her full-page glory, was Christie Denman, in mermaid state, looking shocked and scared as she floated on the surface of a pool.

"What actually happened?" Anna asked Cleo, gulping.

Cleo scanned the article. "She was pushed into the water at her school swimming sports. It was in broad daylight and she had nowhere to hide. And it's all on camera, thanks to the beauty of technology!"

Cleo's heart stammered as she read the last sentence.

The specimen has been captured and transported to the University of Sydney for examination and experimentation.

'The specimen'- it disgusted Cleo.

She read it a second time, aloud to the others.

Rikki closed her eyes in an agonized expression. _Captured_. That hit a little too close to home. She thought back to the cold floors and disorienting darkness of her own captivity. And those men hadn't even known she was a mermaid, hadn't _experimented_â€|

Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "We have to help her."

Bella looked up in surprise. "Rikki? Are you serious?"

"I am. I won't rest until she's free, until sheâ€|" Rikki faltered, unusually emotional.

Cleo nodded, biting her lip. "Okay. I'm in."

"So am I," Anna said.

Bella looked at Rikki again, trying to decipher her thoughts. She sighed. "Me too."

oOoOoOoOo

Cleo stopped to give Lewis a brief peck on the lips as she threw the last of her necessities into a small carry-all.

"I hope we won't be long," she said, "And I hope nothing goes wrong."

He looked up at her with penetrating eyes.

"It had better not," he said softly, "Because I love you so very much, and I don't think I could bear for you to be put in a fish tank."

Cleo smiled, her eyes darting over to Romeo and Juice in their own fish tank. A shiver ran down her spine as she thought of what Christie must be going through.

The Pacific will keep you safe

"Sorry, honey, what was that?" Cleo asked her husband, her thought train interrupted by his deep voice.

"I didn't say anything," Lewis said warily.

Cleo frowned, "No, you did, about the Pacificâ€¦. Didn't you?"

Lewis shook his head. Cleo inhaled sharply. "I must have been hallucinating," she murmured, staring at the fish tank.

There was a knock at the door. "Cleo, we're going!"

"Love you." Cleo kissed Lewis again, then gave Jennie and Max a tight hug.

oOoOoOoOo

Anna, Bella, Cleo and Rikki stood at the water's edge, the afternoon sun blazing hot on their backs.

"We'll be fine," Bella reassured them.

Rikki nodded, her chest thudding. "The question is, will she?"

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Oh look, it's December already! It's amazing how quickly time flies... I know I said it'd be a few months, but a week later, here we are! Thank you all so much for your feedback! Your reviews get me motivated to write more, so please don't stop! :-)**

****Thanks go especially to**** _SparksFly3737, gabisamore, Zikki3 _**and**_ Kat238 _**f****or reviewing... and to**** the unnamed guest who asked for quintuplets- sorry, not planning on it! But maybe another baby soon...**

****Kate x****

****P.S.** To less dedicated readers, or to those who I continue to confuse with my nonsensical thought trains, the mermaid in the paper is Christie Denman, who appeared in Chapters 7-11 of this story.

43. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part IV

The warehouse was surprisingly dark and dingy, Bella noted with hope. Perhaps their fears of maximum-security lockdown were unjustified.

After all, getting past the gate-guard had been ridiculously easy. Anna had thought to bring a sealed zip-lock of cookies in case Christie hadn't been fed. As it happened these had come in handy for bribery along the way.

"Do you think there's even anyone here?" Cleo hissed sideways.

Rikki looked at her with a worried expression. "The guard might have lied."

"Shhh," Anna hushed them. She could hear voices.

Fear pricked at Bella's neck as they turned down the hallway. At the end was a set of double doors, locked by fingerprint identification.

"Damnit," Rikki muttered, "What are we gonna do?"

Silently, Cleo molded a few drops of water from the leaking pipe on the wall and transferred it onto the device.

In a flurry of hand movement, she shaped and reshaped it into different fingerprints until the system accepted it as a correct match.

Rikki raised her eyebrows, impressed.

"Where'd you learn that?" she whispered.

Cleo put a finger to her lips, "I'll tell you later."

The girls proceeded with caution through the open double doors. They paused as the doors shut automatically behind them.

"Fancy!" Anna giggled. She clapped a hand over her mouth as she remembered the need for silence. "Oops," she mouthed to the others.

As the girls turned, their eyes widened as they saw the laboratory in which they now stood. Stark white and filled with foreign technology, the lab was easily the most advanced place the girls had ever been.

Bella gaped. Her eyes darted to the back of the room, where a huge fish tank dominated the space. Bella felt like Alice in Wonderland: everything around her was so much bigger than it should be. The tank itself was several metres wide, and the fish who rested at its surface was the same size as Bella herself.

Then she remembered. It wasn't a fish.

Christie had her back to them, her torso and below dangling in the water but her arms resting on the tank's edge. Even before they saw her face, the girls could see how dejected she felt.

"May I help you?" an indignant voice queried.

The girls wheeled around. The man who stood before them was in his early twenties, was rather sweaty and nervous-looking, and wore a labcoat, glasses and a peculiar expression.

Rikki's mind sprang into action. "Hi," she said sweetly, "I'm Rikki Bennett. Enchant!" She extended her hand to be kissed and fluttered her eyelashes at the nerdy little man.

Anna and Bella exchanged a look. Rikki didn't really think this would work, did she?"

"Oh, uh, er," stuttered the man, bending over Rikki's hand awkwardly. His glasses slipped down his nose as he did so. "Hello Miss Bennett, I, uh-

"Please, call me Rikki," she crooned.

"Well, er, Rikki, I'm David, David White, and I'm in charge of this unit of, er, research," David stammered, obviously unaccustomed to the attentions of pretty girls.

Cleo was watching this amusing interaction with one eye, the other eye firmly fixed on the tank on the other side of the lab. Christie had noticed them, and gasped audibly.

David, distracted by Rikki's and now Bella's flirtations, didn't even notice.

"Wow, David," Bella said, opening her blue eyes widely, "You must be incredibly smart to be in charge of this. Smart men are so attractive, don't you think Rikki?"

"Oh, totally," Rikki said. She tipped her head slightly to indicate to Anna and Cleo that now was the time to act. "Tell me, David, what did you study at university?"

Anna and Cleo edged surreptitiously out of the conversation, and once out of David's line of vision, rushed towards the fish tank.

"Christie, are you alright?" Anna whispered frantically.

Christie looked older. Her eyes were weary and her shoulders drooped as she nodded. Cleo had already scaled the ladder next to the tank and motioned to Christie to swim towards her. Careful not to get wet herself, Cleo helped Christie drag her tail down the ladder and onto the concrete floor. She moaned slightly, obviously in pain.

Rikki, still making flirtatious eyes at David, contorted her hand to help Anna dry off Christie's tail. Suddenly back in human form, Christie stood, with Cleo's help.

Bella breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness," she murmured.

Her comment startled David. He looked about himself and noticed that his specimen had escaped her captivity. Baffled, his eyes darted from girl to girl, a bewildered cry escaping his throat.

"No!" David yelled as the girls ran for the door. He pressed a large red button and an alarm sounded.

"Crap!" Rikki swore as the door locked itself. She tried using her power to burst through it, but accidentally sent a lightening bolt

shooting through the giant fish tank.

A tsunami of tank water flooded the lab, transforming all five of the girls and drenching David.

"Well this is useful!" Cleo exclaimed frustratedly. Outside, she could hear a couple of guards coming down the hallway. The door was locked, but it wouldn't take them long to get through.

David flailed in the knee-deep water, uncertain as to how to act. He gasped as he saw the other four mermaids, trying in vain to splutter out a sentence.

"But you. stop how must no!"

Anna felt along the floor for a way out. Nothing except hard concrete.

"What are we going to do?" Bella cried frantically as the guards bashed at the door.

Suddenly, Anna felt the cool metal of an iron grate. She sent a blast of hard water at it and it burst.

"Come quickly!" she yelled to the others.

They swam through the narrow gap and down into the storm-water system. The last to go through, Bella sealed a layer of gel across the entrance to prevent David or the guards from following them.

Back in the lab, the guards burst through the door to find David alone, soaked and sobbing in a pool of water and shattered glass.

oOoOoOoOo

The pipe spilled out into the Pacific near a secluded beach. One by one, the mermaids slipped out of it and into the ocean.

A little boy of about four, picnicking with his family, saw the mermaids. His jaw dropped and he turned to his mother in amazement. "Mommy, mommy! Did you see those mermaids?"

"Oh hush Timmy, don't be silly!" Turning to Timmy's father: "That boy is always coming up with the strangest stories!"

In the sea, the five mermaids sped out to the middle of the Pacific and surfaced simultaneously.

"Thank you," Christie gasped, her chest heaving.

"Any time," Rikki smiled.

"So what do we do now?" Bella asked, gazing out at the endless blue expanse that surrounded them.

Cleo closed her eyes and smiled. "The Pacific will keep us safe."

oOoOoOoOo

****Author's Note:** Thanks to all my amazing reviewers. Special shout-out to ****_BlazingLegend_**** for being awesome! ******

****You'll** all be glad to know that I am, once more, enthused about this story! I've mapped out the next 27 chapters (yes, you heard me right, TWENTY-SEVEN!) and I'll hopefully have them written by the end of the year! Let me know if you're enjoying the story, any storylines you'd like me to include and which characters you want to see more of in the future!******

****Please** keep reading and reviewing! You guys are awesome :-)******

****Kate x****

44. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part V

September 22nd 2019

"Will, could you help me for a second?" a nervous voice called.

"Just a second," Will called back. He finished changing Danielle's diaper and scooped her up into his arms. She giggled as her father blew on her forehead, her rosy cheeks lifting in a broad smile.

"See, honey bunny, we can do this without Mama, can't we? Oh yes we can, yes we can!"

Zane had, in the mean time, come into the nursery and coughed noisily. He cocked an eyebrow at Will in amusement.

"What?" Will said in a blasÃ© tone, shrugging.

Danielle began a string of babble, randomly varying syllables for the fun of it. Will and Zane grinned at her antics.

"Good girl, my Danny-anny-ella!" Will cooed.

Zane looked at him quizzically.

"What is it you _want_, Zane?"

"I need help, Will," Zane said, his comical expression becoming one of pleading, "There's four of them. Four! I have two arms and two eyes. They have eight arms and eight eyes and eight mouths and eight brains andâ€¦"

Will cut him off with a laugh. "Eight brains? I didn't know you had two-headed children."

Zane frowned, retracing his words. "Oh. Right. But please, Will? I don't know how to manage all of them without Rikki here!"

"They'll be back soon enough, I'm sure," Will reassured him, but truthfully not sure at all, "But in the mean time it's probably best

we men stick together."

oOoOoOoOo

Somewhere in the Pacific

"I'm exhausted," Anna moaned as the five mermaids surfaced. Her pregnant belly was slowing her down, and she was quite certain nobody had an idea where they were going. "Can we take a break?"

"Where?" Cleo snapped, "There's nowhere to break."

Anna looked at her, hurt by her tone. Cleo sighed.

"I'm sorry Anna," she apologized, "I guess I'm pretty tired and crabby myself."

"Does anyone actually have a clue which way is home?" Bella inquired.

"Home?" Christie spluttered. It was the first word she'd spoken since they rescued her. "We can't go home!" she coughed weakly, "I'm notorious now."

"Not home home for you. Mako. We'll be safe there. Nobody else even goes there," Rikki reassured her.

"Except for the building crew at the Marine Reserve," Anna said quietly, "They're there every day until the middle of November. We can't risk it."

"But what are we going to do?" Cleo moaned, "We can't just stay out here forever. Anna's tired, I'm crabby and Christie's on the point of death. We'll turn on each other!"

"You make it sound like Lord of the Flies," Rikki commented.

Four pairs of startled eyes turned to stare at Rikki.

"What?" she snapped, "I went to high school! I know stuff."

"When we studied Lord of the Flies in high school, you didn't read it, complained about how dull and dark it all was, and flunked the exam," Cleo laughed.

"Wellâ€¦" Rikki said defensively, "I read the back cover."

Bella giggled. "That sounds more like the Rikki we know and love!"

A sudden current flew past them in the water, throwing Anna off-balance with its force.

"What was that!?" Anna exclaimed.

"Please don't be a shark, please don't be a shark!" Cleo squealed, clambering on top of Rikki and squeezing her eyes shut.

"It could be a giant squid," Rikki said in an ominous tone.

Cleo shrieked in terror.

Bella ducked under the water and swam in the direction of the blur. When she surfaced again, about ten metres away, she was laughing hysterically.

A few seconds later, another blond head popped up next to Bella's and the two swam back to join the rest of the group.

"Emma!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

Emma was breathless but smiling.

"Oh thank goodness!" she exclaimed as she noticed Christie. She embraced her in the water, taking note of her pale complexion and dull eyes. "Are you alright?"

Christie nodded unconvincingly.

"Emma, have you swum all the way from France since I called you?" Cleo questioned with wide eyes.

Emma nodded, still trying to catch her breath.

"That's gotta be some sort of record!" Anna exclaimed excitedly, "You could go in the Guinness Book of World Records!"

Five pairs of eyebrows raised in astonishment.

"Not that we could tell anybody," Anna added sheepishly, "I knew that."

"So which way is home?" Bella asked Emma.

"West," she replied, "Towards the sun. Out of interest, why are you guys all the way out here?"

"Why, where are we?" Cleo asked.

"A couple kilometers north of Fiji."

oOoOoOoOo

It was pitch black by the time six mermaids surfaced in the moon pool. A perfect half moon was centered in the volcanic opening.

They collapsed onto the rocks and panted exhaustedly. Rikki dried Christie off before heating her own tail. Anna dealt with the rest of the drying process.

Six humans now lay exhausted on the floor of the cavern.

"We could," Cleo began, "Nah, never mind."

"What were you going to say?" Bella murmured, her eyes already closed in exhaustion.

"We could just sleep here tonight," Cleo suggested, "I'm too tired to walk home. Besides, it's already, what, one? Everyone will be asleep. Nobody will even notice whether we come back or not."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Anna, curling up into a ball in the corner.

"Em? Rikki? Christie?"

They three were already asleep.

oOoOoOoOo

The next morning, around eleven.

Rikki opened one eye a crack. Where was she?

She sat up, stretching out her legs.

"Ow!" a voice exclaimed.

Rikki had kicked Bella as she stretched, and she now sat up too, disoriented.

"Oh, my neck," Bella moaned, trying to click the knot out of it.

Cleo and Emma lay fast asleep next to eachother by the water's edge.

"Cleo?" Rikki called, trying to wake them, "Emma? Morning time."

Neither awoke.

"Can you go wake them, please Rikki?" Bella asked pleadingly. Her legs had fallen asleep.

"Ughh," Rikki complained, shuffling on her backside over to where the girls slept. She pinched Cleo's arm.

Cleo awoke in a flurry of pain. She yelped and rolled over quickly to avoid whatever predator was trying to kill her, falling straight into the moon pool, and taking Emma down with her, in the process.

The splash didn't wake up Anna and Christie, but Emma's shriek did.

Bella looked at Rikki in indignation. "I said _wake_ them, not _wet_ them."

Emma and Cleo were not amused. They hauled their transformed bodies out of the water, and Anna quickly set about drying them.

"How are you doing Christie?" Bella asked.

"Truthfully?" Christie said, "I don't know. I feel like it's all been a dream."

"A nightmare, more like," laughed Bella.

"My head aches, my whole body feels weak and I can't keep my eyes open," Christie related, trying to sit up.

Cleo and Emma were back in human form by now. "Let's go home," Cleo sighed.

Rikki hoisted Christie onto her back to give her a piggyback ride back to the village.

"Ooph, you weigh a tonne!" Rikki complained, nearly dropping her.

The party walked slowly, wearily back to the village. As they neared the main building, they heard music.

The girls looked at each other in bewilderment.

Bella opened the front door, but paused before going in. She turned to the others with suppressed glee on her face.

"You have to see this," she whispered.

Anna, Cleo and Emma popped their heads around the door frame.

In the living room, a strange gathering, somewhere between a production line, party and a playpen, was taking place.

"If you're happy and you know it," blared from the speakers in the corner. Zane, Ben and Will had made a production line for diaper changing along the floor, and sang and clapped along with the music. Lewis was dancing in a circle with the other children, balancing on one foot as he attempted to pirouette.

Cleo couldn't bear it. A hysteric shriek of laughter burst from her. All of the guys looked up in terror.

Lewis caught his balance and ran to turn the music off.

An awkward pause ensued, wherein no-one knew quite what to say.

Emma and Anna were in fits of silent laughter.

"It'sâ€¦" Ben began feebly, "It's not what it looks like!"

Bella caught her breath long enough to say, "Oh, I think it's _exactly_ what it looks like."

They closed the front door and spilled onto the grass outside in convulsions of laughter.

oOoOoOo

****Author's Note:**** ****Hello, lovely readers! Thanks for persevering with this story! I hope you're still enjoying it. I'm enjoying writing it, which is all that really matters I guess! ****

****I'm right in the middle of final exams (four down, three to go!), which helps to explain my absence for a while. Starting at the beginning of December, I'm hoping to get a chapter up every other day! Don't hold me to that though, because I do have a job, rehearsals for the musical and friends to hang out with. But I'll try!****

****Thanks to all the wonderful reviewers- you guys are _amazing!
_Please continue reviewing- it really brightens my day and gives me
motivation to write more. If you want more to read, remember that
there's a direct correlation between how many of you review and how
quickly I write! (not true, but still). Special thanks go to my
amazingly awesome pen pal _Blazing Legends_. We've started a
competition for the month of December- whomever gets the most
chapters up by New Years' Eve wins! Works well if you're as
competitive as I am. If you'd like to join the competition, review or
PM me! We start December 1st. :-)****

****Kate x****

45. Episode Eight, Fish Tank: Part VI

Three weeks later (October 13th)

"Rikki dearest, what would you like to say to the camera?" Bella asked, pointing the video recorder at her.

From behind her kitchen counter, Rikki rolled her eyes. She inhaled the rest of her sandwich in one bite.

"Ugh, lovely," Bella said, watching her chew indelicately.

"I don't see why I have to be on this," Rikki complained, her mouth still full.

Next to Bella, Christie looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Oh you have to, Rikki! Please!" Christie begged her, "I'm sure the more people I see the more I'm going to remember."

Rikki grumbled her protest. "It's only until your memory comes back anyway. Look at what happened with Ben! That was only two months ago and he's right as rain now."

"Rikkiâ€|" Christie whined.

"Fine! I'm not photogenic though," Rikki acquiesced.

"Well then you're lucky it's a video, not a photo," Bella smiled. She hoisted up the camera to eye level and counted down from three on her fingers.

As Bella hit the record button, Rikki swished her hair around like a prima donna and batted her eyelashes at the camera.

"Hi Christie." Rikki's voice was sweet enough to murder diabetics. "You don't remember me now, but I'm Rikki, the most amazing person in the world. You used to be a mermaid- now you're just an ordinary girl. Ha!"

Bella stopped the film rolling. "Rikki," she growled, "Do it properly."

Rikki rolled her eyes.

"Taaaake two!" Bella called.

oOoOoOoOo

"Cleeeeeeeeeeeo-e-o-e-o!" Emma called chirpily, "Let's go to the moon pool!"

"Now?" Cleo grumbled, "But I just got Max down for his nap. He didn't sleep a wink last night."

"He'll be fine- Lewis is just in the next room if he wakes up. Take a break for a bit. You're looking awful," Emma said diplomatically.

"Thaaanks," Cleo said, scrunching up her forehead. She peered into the mirror. "Gosh, it is that bad, isn't it." Her eyes were ringed in darkness and bloodshot.

"A good friend tells you that you look great no matter what. A great friend will tell you when you don't," Emma laughed.

"Keeeee," Arianna babbled from Emma's arms.

Emma looked down at her in delight. "That's right, sweetpea! Kee-o! Auntie Cleo! So clever, baby girl."

Cleo looked up at the ceiling.

"Wow, the fish have really grown," Emma remarked.

"They have, haven't they?" Cleo agreed, noticing herself how enormous Romeo and Juice now were.

"I don't know what it is about those two, but they kind of give me the creeps," Emma said.

"Yeah, me too," Cleo said in a hushed tone, "I always feel like they can understand what I'm saying. Sometimes I think they even speak too."

"Stranger things have happened, I guess," Emma said, "We're living testimony of that."

Juice swished her tail around the tank. Arianna squealed delightedly and reached out her plump little arms towards the tank.

"Hey, sweetpea!" Emma cooed at her, "Do you see Romeo and Juice?"

Cleo dawdled down the hallway to grab her sunglasses. Along the way she stuck her head into Jennie's room. The four-year-old was playing with her doll's house on the floor.

"Do you want to come to the moon pool, honey?" Cleo asked her daughter.

"Can I bring Mr. Bubblington and Dilly-Dally?" Jennie asked.

Cleo smiled. Sometimes she feared her little girl was growing up far too fast- but moments like these reassured her that maturity was a long ways off yet. "Of course!"

As they walked down the familiar and worn path to the moon pool, the forest was unusually noisy. Overhead, a vast array of birds nested in the treetops and cicadas chirped energetically.

"Don't you love spring?" Cleo asked happily.

Emma smiled. She was glad to get Cleo out of the house for a bit- returning to nature always perked her up.

They reached the moon pool, and Emma let Cleo go in before her. She stopped dead in her tracks as she heard Cleo's shriek.

"Oh my word, what's happened?" Emma asked, too afraid to walk further. Her fears dissolved as she heard Cleo's roaring laughter.

Running into the moon pool, Emma saw the cause of her glee.

"Annaâ€¦!" Emma began, "Honey, what are you doing?"

"I thought it looked a bit drab!" Anna said from atop a ladder.

"Yes, but pink?" Cleo giggled.

"Is pink not okay? The baby's a girl after all," Anna said.

"Sweetie, one normally paints the nursery pink, not theâ€¦ moon pool," Emma said, her eyebrows raised as she surveyed her surroundings. Anna had not made a bad effort of it. She'd painted all but one wall (and this she now attacked with a paintbrush) in a soft shade of rose. The moon pool now, instead of resembling an ancient cavern, was more akin to the girls' department of a Babies'R'Us store.

At the top of the ladder, Anna pursed her lips. "Huh. Perhaps I've gone a bit overboard with the nesting."

"Perhaps!" Cleo agreed.

oOoOoOoOo

The next day

"Well?" Bella said, taking Christie's hands in hers, "Are you ready?"

The girls watched her face anxiously.

"Your last day as a mermaid," Cleo noted sadly, "You sure you want to go through with it?"

Christie gulped. "Well of course I have to. I've got no other choice. What- stay here hiding on Mako for the rest of my life? Or go back and risk being put in a fish tank again? No, it's best this way. Start again from the beginning, build a new life."

"Where are you going to go?" Emma asked.

"I've talked to Mum," Christie said, "She thinks Singapore, maybe. A university there has offered her a position as a professor. It's far enough away to avoid scandal."

The girls nodded. The silence was thick with sadness and anticipation.

"I'm so sorry it has to end this way, Christie," Rikki said, offering her arms.

Christie fell into her embrace, and the other girls joined in the hug.

"So is there anything you want to do before the moon rises?" Anna asked.

Christie grinned. "Let's go for a swim."

oOoOoOoOo

Phoenix Island

On a beach on the far side of the island, Rikki, Anna, Cleo, Emma and Bella lay in the sand, looking up at the full moon with tears in their eyes.

No-one really felt like speaking. Their hearts were full. Each of the girls knew how easily it could have been them who now faced losing their tail forever. Christie was the unlucky one, and she had to pay the price, but every one of them could have lived this fate a thousand times over had it not been for the support of their friends and family.

The moon was high in the sky. It was nearing one in the morning.

"Do you think that by nowâ€¦" Rikki trailed off.

Anna nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

Rikki ran her hands through her hair, a lone tear trailing down her nose. "It's really the end."

"For her, Rikki," Cleo said softly, "Not for us. Never for us."

oOoOoOoOo

The next morning

Five heads bobbed up in the Phoenix Island moon cavern. They gently explained to Christie a bit of what was going on, and convinced the now tailless and oblivious girl to swim back to Mako with them.

Emma watched Christie's legs kick in the water. For a brief moment she thought back to her early career as a swimmer, and smiled sadly to think that she'd never get that opportunity.

They walked ashore once dry, and escorted Christie to the living room. Bella slipped the DVD into its played and turned the television

on.

Christie inhaled sharply as her own face came on the screen.

"Hey Christie, it's me! Or you, should I say," the on-screen Christie laughed.

As they watched the video, the girls laughed and cried along with Christie as she and they relived her story. When at last the screen turned black, Christie looked up at them with wide eyes.

"Is it really true?" she asked, in awe.

The girls nodded.

Christie closed her eyes, processing. She looked up with a smile. "Thank you. For everything. Thank you."

"One day," Bella said, climbing onto the arm of Christie's chair, "You'll be able to tell your grandchildren that for a whole seven months, you were a mermaid."

"It's quite the tail to tell," Christie said, laughing.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Thank you all so much for reviewing the last chapter. For theatreandhorses, I'm going to be Maria in our school production of The Sound of Music next year! I'm very excited. **One of my best friends (known as Krystalslazz on here) is Sister Sophia.**_
>**

****It seems my plans have, once again, been foiled, for I now find myself (though on holiday and free of exams) busier than ever! Between rehearsals and work, I've even less time to write than I had while on study leave. Do forgive me, darling readers! I'll not abandon you, I promise! Please read and review! ****

****Kate :-))****

****NEXT TIME: Episode Nine, Trick or Treat?****

****It's Halloween on Mako Island, and the children couldn't be more excited. But what mischief will they wreak? And when Cleo receives flowers from a mysterious source, will her relationship with Lewis be threatened?****

****Tune in to this brand-new instalment of H2O: A Spin on Things.****

46. Episode Nine: Part I

Author's Note: Okay, so I realized something. A few things, actually:

**a) I haven't published on here in... er... a long time.
BECAUSE**

****b)** I'm far too busy (and distracted by useless things) to write often **AND****

****c)** I didn't have any chapters stored up **EXCEPT****

****d)** A few chapters I'd written for a further point in the story **WHICH****

****e)** nevertheless would fit just fine being published now.******

****Make any sense? No? Clear as mud? Good.****

_1__st__ December 2019_

"And so, as the Mayor of the Gold Coast, I henceforth declare the Mako Island Marine and Wildlife Reserve open to the public."

As the large silver scissors swished elegantly through the ceremonial ribbon, the gathered crowds cheered jubilantly. The sun beamed down gloriously upon the proceedings, and even the roaring ocean became still, as if proud of its protÃ©gÃ©es for their accomplishment.

A bead of sweat trickled down Anna's forehead as she clapped wearily. She smiled, genuinely excited, but her internal monologue was something to the tune of '_it's hot. It's very hot. I'm so hot. Keep smiling. But it's HOT._' As if wanting to increase Anna's misery, the baby kicked her sharply in the ribs and she grimaced inwardly.

"Behave!" Anna whispered to her stomach.

Emma's eyes darted sideways, giving the restless redhead a quizzical look.

"Not you," Anna mouthed to Emma, and pointed at her stomach.

Emma nodded, giggling.

Will and Ben grinned for the cameras as they posed next to the Mayor, then beckoned the others in for a picture of the whole group.

The gang smiled pleasantly and in turn shook the Mayor's hand.

Bella was amazed at how many people had come. The direct ferry boat they had chartered from the mainland to Mako meant that several hundred people had turned out for the Marine Reserve's Grand Opening. Bella raised a hand to her brow and squinted into the sunlight to survey the crowds. Her heart swelled as she noticed her parents and sisters in the mass of people.

"I'll be back," Bella murmured to Will and skipped down the deck stairs to the grassy field where people had gathered to watch the ceremony.

Her two sisters ran to greet her.

"Ellie! Georgia!" Bella cried, embracing them, "It's been so long."

It _had_ been a long time since the three sisters had been reunited.

Ellie, Bella's younger sister, had returned to Ireland four years ago to study for her master's degree in Chemistry. Georgia, the baby of the family, had just completed her undergraduate degree in Accounting, and had gotten a job at a firm in Sydney. Bella's family had never been to Mako, and she couldn't be more excited to show them around. Fiona and Cameron kissed their daughter, immensely proud of her.

"Let me show you the island!" Bella smiled.

oOoOoOoOo

"Well, Mrs. Bennett, how do you like your new office?" Zane asked as Rikki swung into her new desk chair.

She pursed her lips, looking this way and that, trying to contain her excitement.

"It'll do," she said simply, raising her eyebrows at her husband.

For Rikki and Zane, the opening of the marine reserve was bittersweet. They were both enthusiastic about the new adventure, but working on Mako meant they were forced to hand over the management of Rikki's Caf  . In the end, they decided it was pertinent to sell, as they could use the extra cash.

The week before, Rikki had begrudgingly handed over the keys to a pleasant middle-aged couple that planned to turn her beloved Caf   into an upmarket Italian restaurant.

Eventually, though, Rikki's grief-stricken heart had been thawed by her new work at the marine reserve. Surprisingly business-minded, Rikki had taken the role of CEO of Mako Enterprises, and was thriving in her new profession.

"I'm going to go get the boat started up," Zane said, looking out the window at the low sun, "It's probably time for everyone to be getting home."

Rikki smiled at him and opened up her laptop. After a little while tallying the donations the reserve had received from numerous beneficiaries, the door opened again.

"Hey Anna," Rikki said, glancing up from the computer screen.

Anna, in her present condition, was quite unfit to be conducting tours of the reserve, and had decided to stick to secretarial work, at least until the baby was born.

"Zane's mother is on the phone," Anna told her, arching her back in an attempt to dislodge the baby's foot from in between her ribs.

Rikki got up, grinning, and picked up the line.

"Hey Vanessa!"

Anna felt dizzy as she walked out of Rikki's office. Out on the balcony, Anna watched Zane escort the last of the tourists onto the

boat. Cleo came darting up the outside stairs, her hair falling out of the tidy updo of the morning's ceremony.

"You okay Anna?" Cleo asked, frowning at her friend's pale face.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine," Anna reassured her, "It's just the heat. I'm so tired, and the baby won't get her foot out of my ribcage. If I haven't said it already, I'm fairly certain she'll be a dancer- she's got incredible turnout!"

Cleo laughed and hung her torso over the balcony railing. "I think today went well, don't you?"

"Anna?"

Cleo turned and inhaled in shock as she discovered Anna passed out on the deck. Her knees were buckled oddly under her belly, which Cleo was sure couldn't be comfortable. She quickly checked Anna's vital signs to make sure it wasn't anything too serious, then ran inside to get some water.

"Rikki, can you page Lewis to come right away?" Cleo called on her way through.

By the time Cleo returned, Anna was sitting up, dazed and sweaty but conscious.

"Are you alright?" Cleo asked anxiously.

Anna drank the water and wiped her brow.

"I'm so sorry about that! I completely blacked out for a moment," Anna said shakily.

"It's okay, hon, it's not your fault!" Cleo laughed.

Lewis trotted up the stairs, puffing.

"Cleo, what's wrong!?" he asked frantically, "Rikki just sent me a really cryptic text."

"It's just me, Lewis," Anna said, "I fainted, but I'm okay now."

"Oh," Lewis said, "Are you really fine? I think I should probably take you back to the village for some check-ups."

Anna sighed, feeling that everyone was being far too melodramatic, but acquiesced as Lewis scooped her up and carried her back to the village.

"I can walk," she grumbled.

oOoOoOoOo

"And we're back where we started!" Bella said, finishing off her tour of the island, "You guys are going to stay tonight, right? I can go prepare the guest room if you want."

Her mother smiled. "Darling, we are amazed! You've really made quite

a life for yourself, haven't you?"

Bella ducked her head in embarrassment and escorted her family into the dining hall.

After dinner, Jake tugged on the edge of Georgia's skirt and she knelt down and smiled at him.

Jake looked around suspiciously, before whispering in Georgia's ear. He pulled back and giggled, watching Georgia frown cheekily.

"Okay," she said, nodding at Jake, then stood back up.

"Jake and I are going to go on an adventure," Georgia said, laughing.

Bella eyed her son, making note of the twinkle of mischief playing around the corners of his mouth.

"All right," Bella said cautiously, "But no swimming." Bella had told her parents about being a mermaid, but her sisters had both been overseas when the big announcement was made, and she had no intention of letting out the secret to even more people. She shuddered, thinking about what had happened to Christie when more people knew than was necessary.

Jake protested with pleading eyes.

"No, Jake, no swimming, and that's final!" Bella said firmly. She exchanged a knowing look with her mother and father.

Georgia grabbed Jake's hand and they set off down the trail.

"Be back by nine!" Bella called nervously. Her gut sank a little, not fully trusting her sister or her son to behave. She brushed away the thought, and smiled at Ellie.

"Lemonade?"

oOoOoOoOo

"You're not serious!" Anna protested.

"Anna, it's for your own good. For the baby's good!" Lewis insisted.

"But she's not due to be born until just before Christmas! That's more than three weeks away! What am I going to do in bed for three weeks?" Anna huffed.

"We'll come over every day," Cleo promised, "And Emma will surely come up with something for you to do. Man, she'd be a good dictator."

Anna looked exasperated. "Fine," she said, giving in, "But it'll be so boring. Is fainting once really a good reason to put me on bed rest? Come on, Lewis, I'm a grown up."

"You're not acting like one," Lewis muttered under his breath.

"I heard that!" Anna cried angrily.

oOoOoOoOo

Emma knocked on the door of the office quietly. "Rikki?" she called cautiously.

"Hi! Yes! Come in!"

Emma raised her eyebrows at the perky tone.

"Well, hello Emma!" Rikki smiled brightly, "I was just finishing off some work."

Emma nodded. "Yeah, I know. You're finishing off some work at nine pm. You didn't come back for dinner, so I thought I'd bring you some." She slipped the plate onto Rikki's desk and sat down in a chair.

Rikki glanced at the delicious looking meal and up at Emma. "Thanks, but I don't really have time to eat." She returned to typing.

Emma shut Rikki's laptop screen with a thud.

"Hey!" Rikki protested.

Emma looked sternly at her friend. "Now, Rikki, you know me, right?"

Rikki rolled her eyes. "Yes, Emma, I know you."

"And you know that I don't advocate laziness."

Rikki snorted. "No you certainly don't."

"But I also think there is such a thing as too much work," Emma continued, "And in the long run, you're only going to hurt yourself by becoming a workaholic."

Rikki looked apathetically at Emma.

"I'm serious!" Emma chided her, "Please leave the work for tomorrow, eat your food and come home! You need sleep."

Rikki grumbled but shut down the computer.

"Never thought I'd hear those words from you, Emma Dove!"

oOoOoOoOo

Ellie dandled Danielle (who was named after her) on her lap, looking adoringly at the little girl.

Bella came back into her living room and flopped onto the sofa. "Mom and Dad are all settled in the main house guest room," she informed her sister, "You tired?"

"Not really," Ellie murmured, cuddling Danielle to her chest. Dannie protested and pulled back, wanting to look at her aunt's face.

Ellie grinned as Dannie put her plump hand against Ellie's cheek. "Auntie Ellie look like Mama," Dannie said thoughtfully, looking from Bella to Ellie and back again, "Mama, where is Jakie?"

Bella checked her watch. "They should probably be back by now," she told Danielle, frowning a bit.

A few minutes later, a knock at the door signaled their return. Jake burst in smiling and gave Bella a sloppy kiss. "I'm reeeally tiiiiired, Mama," he drawled, collapsing into her lap, "Can I get into my pajaaammiiees?"

Ellie hopped up, taking Danielle and Jacob with her. "I'll do that, Bella, you sit," she offered kindly.

Grateful, Bella curled up on the sofa and watched Ellie with the kids.

"She'll be a good mother," Bella said to Georgia.

Georgia nodded, but Bella was concerned by the queer expression on her face.

"George? Everything okay?" Bella queried.

Georgia looked at her square-on. "Do you realize your son has a tail?"

Bella's stomach dropped. She squeezed her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. "You guys went swimming, huh?"

Georgia nodded, feeling slightly guilty for disobeying Bella, but the sense of betrayal overwhelmed that.

"Do you too?" Georgia asked calmly.

"Yeah," Bella admitted sheepishly.

"How long?"

Bella sighed, "Georgia, we really don't have to get into this all now, do we?"

"How long?"

"Since I was nine," Bella said, speaking softly.

Georgia nodded, her expression bitter. "Twenty years. Twenty years and you never thought to tell your own sister?"

Bella's heart ached, overflowing with guilt. "I'm sorry, George, it's justâ€¦"

"I don't know what to say!" Georgia cut her off, "How could you keep this from me? What, did you think I wouldn't understand? That I'd turn you in to be experimented on or something? Lord, Bella!"

Bella had nothing to say. She hung her head, ashamed and heartbroken.

The two sisters sat in stormy silence for what seemed like an eternity. Eventually, Ellie slipped back in, evidently oblivious to the tension in the room.

"It's so amazing to have all three of us back together," Ellie said, blissfully unaware, "Just like old times."

"Yeah," Georgia said darkly, "_Just _like old times. I'm going to get ready for bed."

Ellie frowned as her little sister stormed out. "Golly," she exclaimed, "Do you know what's got her tail in a twist?"

Bella noted the irony and sighed. "Yeah, I do. I most certainly do."

****Author's Note #2: Hope you enjoyed! There's another coming soon, but they're not freshly written (December, maybe?) and (violating my own OCD code of life here) not really edited. Gasp. I know.

****So... yes. Hi again from me! Hope your lives are all going wonderfully well. Mine's pretty good. :-)****

****Kate x****

End
file.